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Democracies: "Sovereign" and "Illiberal". The Russian-Hungarian Game of Adjectives and Its Implications for Regional Security

ALIAKSEI KAZHARSKI*
Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia
Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

SILVIA MACALOVÁ**
Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia

Abstract: The aim of this study is to explore the Hungarian discourse of "illiberal democracy" alongside the older Russian doctrine of "sovereign democracy", to see their possible implications for regional security and examine broader cultural and political backgrounds of these doctrines. The paper argues that the tension between notions of past historical greatness and the currently diminished power status results in the othering of the liberal order, which is seen as responsible for this degradation. The ideological subversions of the concept of democratic governance serve the purpose of self-legitimation, but also operate as ideological justifications for policies meant to revert the current status and thus carry significant security risks for regional stability. In Russia's case, these risks are most plainly manifest as military interventions in neighbouring countries. While in Hungary they take the form of opportunistic self-interest, with a disregard for the rule of law and potential for further subversions of regional order.

Keywords: Hungary, Russia, illiberal democracy, sovereign democracy, security

* aliaksei.kazharski@fses.uniba.sk

** silvia.macalova@gmail.com

Introduction

This paper addresses similarities between the doctrines of *sovereign* and *illiberal democracy* in Russia and Hungary respectively. We take a comparative perspective, arguing that, while there are certainly important differences in both context and content, the two doctrines resemble each other to a significant extent and their ideological affinity cannot be denied. We situate our analysis in a broader cultural and historical understanding of the two cases, which outlines similarities in their historical trajectories and ways in which historical events have been (re)interpreted by collective memories and identitarian narratives. We also discuss the implications that our findings may bear for regional security.

The literature on democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been growing in recent years, and as of the time of writing, there already seems to be a rather differentiated debate on its causes, implications and the choice of approaches to studying it.[1] The scholarship on Hungarian domestic and foreign policy, in particular, is no exception here.[2] One way in which Viktor Orbán scandalized the European public was by expressing his admiration for Vladimir Putin's Russia as a model of a successful "illiberal state", as well as pursuing closer cooperation with the Kremlin, even after the Ukraine crisis of 2014. In light of that, one of the questions that has naturally been addressed in the literature was the nature of this new link between Budapest and Moscow, and whether, the latter, in fact, served as an actual political model for the former. Buzogány's 2017 analysis presents a balanced view, according to which there is no evidence of an ideological "copy-paste" from Russia. Furthermore, the growth of cooperation was not driven by ideology but by interest. On the other hand, however, "there is certainly an overlap both in what Linz has termed 'mentalities' and in the way self-serving elites in both countries use ideational aspects to veil their interests."[3]

While we do not mean to challenge this argument directly, we would, nevertheless, like to draw closer attention to the parallels demonstrated by the ideological underpinning of both regimes, and document and discuss them, perhaps, in somewhat greater detail than has been done in the literature so far. We understand those parallels, above all, as similarities in the discursive strategies of normative distancing from the West, without altogether breaking with one of the overarching Western political concepts (democracy). It is thus a normative distancing that takes the form of subversion and relativization rather than outright rejection and open rebellion. Furthermore, it is rooted in discourses of *sovereignty* and national identity that also demonstrate notable similarities in how they are constructed. These sovereignist discourses, in turn, often refer us to collective memories, which also allow one to trace broader cultural and historical parallels between the two countries.

1 See: Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018.

2 See: Bohle and Greskovits 2018; Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018, Hegedűs 2019; Buzogány 2017; Fazekas and Tóth 2016; Huszka 2017; Krekó and Enyedi 2018; Magyar 2016; Palonen 2018.

3 Buzogány 2017, 8.

The article is structured as follows. First, we briefly outline the theoretical foundations of our study. Then, we provide as brief a discussion as possible of the cultural background of the doctrines of sovereign and illiberal democracies. In the third section, we analyse the doctrines themselves. Finally, we take the broader perspective on the regional retreat of liberalism and reflect on the implications for regional security borne by the doctrines and the regimes that used them for self-legitimation.

A Note on Theory, Method, and Structure

Before we launch our analysis, a brief note on our theoretical foundations is required. Our study draws on the tradition of social constructivist thought in political science and IR. Methodologically speaking, it focuses on the analysis of discourses which are our primary source of data, although we also rely on empirical examinations published by other scholars of Hungary and Russia. We follow in the wake of those students of discourse who emphasize its performative and processual nature, assuming that it is never discovered as a stable system of concepts but rather as a site of constant "linguistic action"[4] as Wodak would put it.

Furthermore, discourse is not seen as merely processual but also as inherently political and oftentimes conflictual. From this perspective, it is a venue of non-ceasing struggles over the definition of key concepts. That understanding was pioneered by Antonio Gramsci with his ideas of "wars of position", *cultural hegemony*, and "organic intellectuals" set to the task of articulating it.[5] Post-Gramscian political thought further developed these ideas into a critical theory of discourse which examines how central concepts or "empty/floating signifiers" are contested by various political discourses aspiring to construct a hegemony.[6]

We draw our inspiration from these general theoretical ideas as well as from more specific examinations of discourses on democracy that can be found in the existing literature. Thus, the 2013 volume edited by Viatcheslav Morozov demonstrates in full empirical detail how "democracy" has become a globally contested signifier, as counter-hegemonic and relativizing discourses have been attempting to challenge established definitions of "democracy" and redefine it to suit their own political purpose.[7]

In line with that, we treat discourses of "sovereign" and "illiberal democracy" as exercises in redefining or *resignifying* this key political term. We believe this theoretical approach to be a particularly promising one in light of the political strategies that the ruling elites in both Moscow and Budapest have pursued. Russia has been long known for its attempts

4 Wodak 2008.

5 Gramsci 1971.

6 Laclau and Mouffe 2001.

7 Morozov 2013, ed.

to offer alternative interpretations to Western concepts importing and then re-exporting them and sometimes, as Huntington shrewdly observed, challenging the West in the name of its own ideologies.[8]

Hungary's international career as "another" or "true Europe"[9] has been more modest, but Orbán's often-quoted promise to bring a cultural counter-revolution to Europeans indicates, as well as a systematic analysis of his political discourse, an ambition to challenge what he sees as a hegemony of liberalism in the West. By a curious coincidence, the Hungarian prime minister is said to be very well acquainted with Gramsci's ideas,[10] which is probably yet another reason to pay closer attention to his discursive strategies. However, there is a more solid argument in favor of carefully examining the cultural and intellectual component. As recent research argues, its role in the "rightward swing of the pendulum in Hungarian politics" may have been somewhat underestimated.[11]

With all this in mind, we turn to examining the similarities between the Russian/Hungarian ideologies of sovereign/illiberal democracies, their cultural and historical roots, and their (geo)political implications. We start by providing the reader with a very brief, bird's eye overview of historical similarities between the two countries. Taking these into account it may be easier to understand how similar sovereignist discourses on democracy refer – whether explicitly or implicitly – to paralleling historical experiences and patterns of national identity formation. We then build our analysis around consecutive and interrelated points of comparison. First, we address the issue of othering the recent past (the transition period) in Russian and Hungarian discourses. Then, we compare the narratives of a lost or compromised sovereignty that hinge on the othering of Western and/or liberal-globalist forces that the two discourses are blaming for this loss. We then analyze the Russian and Hungarian discursive strategy of partially distancing from Western political standards through a decentering or diluting of the notion of democracy, without openly challenging its central role. This puts the two regimes in a similarly ambiguous, hybrid or liminal position *vis-à-vis* Western norms. Following that, we examine the cultural argument as an instrument of relativizing democracy in Russian and Hungarian discourses and point out the fact that in both cases a Huntingtonian *civilizationist* ideology plays a similar role. Our concluding step is a reflection on the security implications, which is more policy-oriented than the previous sections. Without making any specific prognosis, we discuss the possible ramifications of the "adjective discourse" creeping from the post-Soviet area into the European Union and NATO.

8 Huntington 1993, 43.

9 See: Neumann 2017.

10 Greskovits 2020, 5.

11 *Ibid.,* 4–7, 16.

History and Memory in Hungary and Russia: A Brief Note on Similarities

Understanding the broader cultural and historical context is generally important. But even more so when analysing ideological systems that often refer back to collective memories and are, to a significant extent, rooted in earlier traumas which they, in turn, continue to reproduce and reinforce. In this section, we briefly introduce the reader to historical parallels and cultural similarities between Russia and Hungary, which, we believe, are essential for grasping the sovereign/illiberal democracy ideologies, and their similarities in full scope.

Historically, the two countries share a number of notable parallels which can explain why the regime-boosting *exceptionalist* and *self-victimizing* narratives on national identity also run in parallel. Among the most obvious similarities, is the territorial trauma and its significance for the constitution of national identity.

The 1920 Trianon treaty stripped Hungary of more than two-thirds of its population and territory, with significant chunks being transferred to neighbouring states. This event was also a transition from the Kingdom of Hungary that had been poly-ethnic since medieval times to a mono-ethnic Hungary. The Trianon trauma can then perhaps be even called a birth-trauma of the modern Hungarian state. The Russians saw a collapse of their poly-ethnic empire twice in the 20th century, in 1917 and in 1991. Russian Bolshevism managed to restore the Russian empire in part and under a different ideological guise, although significant chunks of the territory were still lost to the newly independent CEE states. Interestingly, Hungary went through a similar experience, as the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (1919) tried (but failed) to reassemble the Kingdom of Hungary under the banner of internationalism. To this day, the Treaty is seen and represented in Hungary as an act of humiliation and excessive punishment, a cause of territorial trauma, fuelling revisionist sentiments and resentment towards those, who are seen as responsible.[12] The significance of the Russian territorial trauma for its present-day politics hardly needs to be discussed post 2014.[13]

Territorial trauma is hardly the only trait both countries share, as post-Communist transitioning was also a source of traumatic experience. In Hungary, this allowed Viktor Orbán to effectively construct a narrative that linked his "liberal" enemies to the years of hardship Hungarians had to go through after 1989, discursively fusing economic neoliberalism and political liberalism.[14] In Russia, for the population *en masse,* transition meant deprivation, unemployment, a pronounced fall in life expectancy and a feeling of general chaos and uncertainty. In contrast to the promised land, as sketched out in the reform programs such as the "500 days"[15] the contraction of the country's economy was, as Putin argued,

12 Akçali and Korkut 2015.

13 See: Kazharski 2019a.

14 Magyar 2016.

15 Blaney and Gfoeller 1993.

one of the largest ever experienced in peacetime.[16] The association of the Western advisers and their young liberal Russian counterparts with the transition did much to fuel the support for the later anti-Western, anti-liberal turn. Putin expressed this in 2017 by saying that the biggest mistake of Russia was to trust the West.[17]

In this respect, another instructive parallel is the historically ambiguous stance *vis-à-vis* the West. For centuries, Russia's stance shifted between imitating and catching up with the West and rejecting and/or challenging it, but its integral position *vis-à-vis* (Western) Europe has been that of *liminality.*[18] Similarly, Hungarians have perceived themselves as members of the European community by virtue of belonging to the Western branch of Christianity since Medieval times. But being situated on the Eastern European periphery, they faced similar "catch up" dilemmas. Furthermore, the dramatic 19th century history, when the growing Hungarian nationalism clashed with the authoritarianism of the Habsburg dynasty in Vienna, had its very tragic moments when the Hungarian "freedom fight" was crushed by the Habsburgs. And in the 20th century, Western great powers who had won the First World War, were, in many Hungarians' eyes, responsible for the Trianon "dismembering" of Hungary. Similar to the Russian case, thus, the position of liminality here implied both being drawn to the West and suffering from it – a collective memory that tends to foster an instinct of suspicion.

But if, generally speaking, national suffering comes in no short supply in CEE, there is also a similarity in which the trope of exceptionalism tends to shape Russian and Hungarian national identity. Exceptionalism here is not merely a different name for particularism or nationalism, although it is an interacting feature of both of these phenomena. Nor is it simply a kind of pride, a justified relishing in the wealth of cultural inheritance, intellectual tradition or a sense of achievement. Exceptionalism is the way in which the discourse about the past is used to create the idea of uniqueness, of holding a special place or having special traits and attributes as a nation or a country. However, in both Russia and Hungary the notions of being special countries with a great past only force the realization that there is a discrepancy between their self-perception and their current place in the international order. Both countries seem to be at the same time adhering to narratives of victimization. The resulting tension between perceptions of past greatness and the currently diminished status leads to attempts to restore lost power or importance. This could also be called messianic exceptionalism as there is a pronounced concern with the potential for actions to challenge the *status quo*, in both Hungary and Russia's cases.

In the case of Russia, this exceptionalism is purposefully built on the shifting historical realities and reinvented time and time again with new events being integrated, re-purposed and used to reinforce it. One continuous theme of Russian exceptionalism is the religious notion of Holy Russia ("Svyataya Rus"), dating back to the 14th century, which designates

16 Putin 2005.

17 O'Connor 2017.

18 Neumann 1999.

Russia as the inheritor of the legacy of the Byzantine Empire, as the only Orthodox Christian country in the world and therefore a special country, with a special purpose, having "a unique and exalted role in the economy of salvation".[19] This messianic purpose reappears later, projected on to different actors over the course of the past five centuries, sometimes even unlikely ones like the leader of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Vladimir Lenin, or the proletariat itself. The Great Patriotic War, where the Soviet Union saw itself as having played the main role in defeating Nazism, was another factor in this self-perception. The most recent manifestation of this messianism can be discerned in the exaltations of president Vladmir Putin by the far-right ideologue Aleksandr Dugin as the "katechon", promised to "prevent the arrival of the Antichrist".[20]

It is interesting to note here, that both Russia and Hungary each lay claims to being the so-called bulwark of Christianity, the *antemurale Christianitatis*. Vladimir Putin has made several speeches where he alluded to Europe being decadent, especially with regard to liberalism and laws intended to promote marriage equality and on the other hand emphasized Russia as being true to conservative Christian values.[21] In Hungary, Viktor Orbán also made use of the same trope of the bulwark of Christianity positioning Hungary as the last bastion of true Christian and European values, whereas according to him the rest of Europe embraced immigration of Muslims, thus diluting and threatening the Christian cultural foundations that Europe was built on.

In the Hungarian case, there is an interesting clash in terms of how exceptionalism makes references and makes use of both the tribal pre-Christian past in a sympathetic nod to Turanism, while also emphasizing the thousand-year long existence of the historical Hungarian kingdom as a specifically Christian state and as an undisputed part of a Christian Europe. Turanism is an ideology dating back to the 1920s and it proposes a kinship of Central Asian nomads: Huns, Magyars, Turks, – and others – in the genetic sense, but also as having common interests. When Viktor Orbán attended the 6th annual Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States in 2018, he spoke about the unique experience of being "both a member of the European Union and an Eastern nation".[22] While this might seem like nothing but a curious expression of Hungarian particularism, it finds more expression in Orbán's foreign policies directed at this particular geographic region. In terms of more recent history, the Hungarian exceptionalism harks back to the revolution of 1848, when the nation saw itself as being among the most progressive in Europe, as well as the anti-Soviet revolution of 1956, and the fall of Communism in 1989.

19 Cherniavsky 1958.

20 Engström 2014.

21 Russia's own version of *antemurale* exceptionalism manifests itself in the idea that its historical mission in Medieval Times was to shield Europe from the Mongol invasion by enduring the three centuries of the "Tartar yoke". This narrative of "bleeding for Europe" is echoed by the claim to the USSR's leading role during World War II, when, as it is argued, Russia once again made tremendous sacrifices in order to deliver Europe and the world from Nazism.

22 Orbán 2018.

In short, there are a number of parallels in the historical experience of the two states and, thus, unsurprisingly, also parallels in collective memories and identitary narratives. On top of that, both countries had very limited opportunities to come to terms with their difficult past through comprehensive public discussion and open democratic debate. Following World War I, the short-lived liberal democratic republics in Russia and Hungary were replaced with authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, which certainly makes it easier for contemporary political leaders to exploit the unresolved dilemmas of national identity. And these cultural backgrounds make it easier to understand the similarities in the doctrines of sovereign and illiberal democracies which we unpack in the next section.

A Game of Adjectives?

Among the many points of convergence between Hungarian and Russian discourses on democracy, sovereignty seems to be the conceptual hub. In both cases, the term is attached to a narrative which could be classified as populist. The narrative speaks of sovereignty lost and regained under the new government – which, at last, makes the nation's democracy a genuine one.

The doctrine of "sovereign democracy" was introduced in Russia in 2006 by Vladislav Surkov, the president's aide, considered by many to be the ideological "grey eminence" who engineered Putin's political system.[23] In his policy articles Surkov defined "sovereign democracy" as "a way of political life in a society in which the authorities, their bodies and their actions are chosen, formed and directed exclusively by the Russian nation, in all its diversity and integrity for the sake of achieving material well-being, freedom and justice by all citizens, social groups and peoples that form this nation."[24]

The emphasis "on exclusively by the Russian nation" is notable here. Its silent implication is that Russia's previous attempts at democracy were not controlled by the Russian but somehow fell under foreign control. This implication is directly linked to the popular narrative of the "roaring 90's" ("likhie devianostye")[25] when post-Communist Russia was weak and chaotic under the "alcoholic president" (Boris Yeltsin). And though formally sovereign, the narrative claims, it was, in fact, "conquered" or "occupied" by the West through its agents (the Russian liberals, "reformists", "Westernizers" and their foreign consultants). In March 2014, as the Russian public was at the peak of its elation over the "return" of Crimea, Ulyana Skoybeda, a journalist well known for her nationalism, published an article in Komsomolskaya Pravda, Russia's major tabloid, typically sympathetic

23 Pomerantsev 2011.

24 Surkov 2006.

25 The adjective "likhie", which accumulates more than one important cultural reference, could be translated as "roaring", "wild" or even "gangster" nineties. Etymologically it is related to both "likhie ludi" and "likholetie". Likhie ludi is an old-fashioned expression for bandits which invokes the image of the 90's as a criminal decade. "Likholetie", on the other hand, refers to the *Time of Troubles*, a pivotal Russian archetype (see below).

with the Kremlin. The article, entitled "I no longer live in a conquered country", equated the 90's to being occupied by the West, a time when Russia's budget had to be approved by the IMF, factories and industrial production were destroyed, culture became degenerate and Americanized, and the country was ridden with poverty and wars.[26]

Skoybeda's emotional article was published at the climax of what many in Russia saw as a restoration of sovereignty, which made up at least partially for the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" – as Putin famously referred to the USSR's collapse. But, in essence, it merely summed up a narrative that had been reproduced countless times in the previous years, repeatedly juxtaposing the days of Putin to the days of Yeltsin. Under Putin, Russia ended its *Time of Troubles* (literally – a period of political instability and foreign interventions[27]), and as someone would eventually put, began *rising from its knees*.

Russia's discussions on sovereignty were always closely linked to concerns about unipolarity and Western hegemony, and the much sought-after "democratization" of the international order understood as a shift to great power multipolarity.[28] Thus, Putin's seminal 2007 Munich speech lambasted "the world of one master, one sovereign."[29] In his ideological conceptualizations, Surkov also called for "a community of sovereign democracies" against "any global dictatorships and monopolies", and for a "democratization of international relations".[30] Surkov's and Skoybeda's writing are separated by a span of eight years. In 2006, the Russo-Georgian war was yet to happen, and few would have imagined the annexation of Crimea. Chronologically, the sovereign democracy doctrine also preceded Russia's so-called "conservative turn" to "traditional values" which the 2014 Ukraine crisis would catalyse into an aggressive anti-Western and anti-liberal ethnonationalism of the "Russian spring".[31] Yet, seen in the retrospective, Surkov's conceptual exercises were the first steps in the *normative distancing* from the West. By the end of his second presidential term (2008) Putin, had built up a hybrid regime, a system of "partial adaptation"[32] as scholars then dubbed it, which only selectively conformed to Western standards. At the same time, the technology of "managed democracy" emasculated political competition, eliminating democracy's crucial element, the uncertainty of election results. The qualifier of "sovereign", semantically anchored in the broader narrative on sovereignty, could be strategically used as a normative back-door – justifying the discrepancies between the Western standards and the Russian model, which had been coming under increasing criticism.

26 Skoybeda 2014.

27 On the political significance of the "Time of Troubles" as a Russian metahistorical archetype, whose origins go back to the 17th century, see: Kazharski 2019b, 87–92.

28 See: Makarychev 2013.

29 Putin 2007.

30 Surkov 2006.

31 See: Gaufman 2017.

32 Sakwa 2010.

If we turn to the Hungarian case now, there are notable similarities to be discovered. Much like his Russian counterparts, Viktor Orbán worked systematically on linking the public perception of liberal democracy to the "two troubled decades" of post-Communist transition (a parallel to Russia's "wild nineties"), which were filled with corruption and poverty, as well as Hungarian people's dependence on multinational corporations and other alien forces that could be associated with the collective West.[33] At times, the prime minister openly accused his political predecessors, the Hungarian Socialist Party, of "selling Hungary's hard-won sovereignty for a pittance."[34] The Left became one of Orbán's favorite targets, and among other things, he incessantly accused it of being in a conspiracy with Eurofederalists, NGOs, George Soros and other vaguely defined forces of globalization. The conspiracy to destroy sovereign nation states was to be carried out through promoting multiculturalism and mass migration, but also through unrestricted flows of financial capital and through building "a European superstate."[35]

Consequently, it was argued that the only way to resist was to *re-sovereignize* Hungary. Absent that, Hungary would only have "constitutional" (i.e. formal) but not "true" sovereignty.[36] In his speeches, Orbán outlined several spheres of public life, the resources required for sovereignty, as he put it, that had to be brought under "strong", even if not "exclusive", influence of the state. Among them were the banking sector, and the media. As regards the media, Orbán declared openly that "a country in which the majority of these instruments for influencing public opinion are possessed by foreigners is not a sovereign country".[37] Eventually, Hungary's media landscape was fundamentally reshaped as, Fidesz gradually built its own "media empire",[38] which included major commercial in addition to state-controlled public media. Influential oppositional media outlets – such as the *Népszabadság* daily – could be purchased and closed without formally violating the freedom of speech standards.

Clear parallels to Russia can be drawn not only in terms of the conceptual juxtaposition of formal and "true" sovereignty but also in terms of practices implied by the sovereign democracy doctrine. Consolidation of the media landscape in Russia was an important element in Putin's "management" of democracy, as major oppositional channels such as *NTV* were brought under government control during Putin's first term in office. Russian oligarchs, who under Yeltsin exercised significant political influence through their ownership of media holdings and other strategic assets, were "reigned in" (some were exiled,

33 Magyar 2016.

34 Hungarian Government 2015a.

35 Hungarian Government 2015b.

36 Krasner's (1999) classical discussion of the four aspects of sovereignty may be of help here. Thus, if we were to translate Orbán's claims into his terminology, Hungary possessed *international legal* sovereignty but was severely short on *interdependence* sovereignty and, to a significant extent, on *Westphalian* sovereignty.

37 Hungarian Government 2015c.

38 Krekó and Enyedi 2018.

others jailed) and the Kremlin recaptured the "commanding heights" of the economy.[39] For Putin, control over major media was instrumental in tilting the political playing field and "domesticating" part of the opposition, while excluding those "radicals" that refused to be co-opted and would not accept the new unspoken rules of the game, so as to create a new, hybrid system where political pluralism was, to some extent, preserved but the uncertainty of elections was, in principle, eliminated.[40]

In Hungary, the media seem to have also been instrumental in consolidating power, as prominent international critics observed. Thus, for example, the OSCE/ODIHR final report on the 2018 parliamentary elections documented media freedom issues and polarized and biased covering of political campaigning. The report noted "a growing concentration of media ownership in the hands of party-affiliated entrepreneurs at the national and regional levels".[41] Similar to Russia, the reshaping of the media landscape was thus embedded in the broader structure of the country's political economy. In Putin's Russia, the oligarchy of the '90s that could afford to manipulate a weakened state was replaced with a politically centralized "neo-patrimonial"[42] or "neo-feudal"[43] system where power and property came to be fused, and economic wealth on a large scale became a function of political loyalty to the ruling clique. Hungary, the experts have argued, eventually arrived at its own form of neo-feudalism.[44] In Bálint Magyar's words, after its landslide victory in 2010, Fidesz "established a new system that can be related not to one of those found in the past, but in the post-communist present of the former Soviet republics (Russia under Putin, Azerbaijan under Aliyev, and some Central Asian republics".[45] From the political economic point of view Hungary's "post-Communist mafia state" with its ruling "Polipburo", as Magyar dubbed the Fidesz-built informal network of politicians and oligarchs, increasingly resembled Putin's Russia.

The two cases, thus, exhibit notable similarities when it comes to the techniques of tilting the political playing field and the ideological underpinnings of those subversive practices. The rhetoric on "genuine" sovereignty should, most likely, be classified as an element of *populist* strategies, as should probably be the narrative on the "Time of Troubles" from which Hungary and Russia emerged thanks to the new leadership. Furthermore, the qualifiers of democracy (whether "sovereign" or "illiberal") are instrumental in political propaganda, as they allow to subvert the notion without directly challenging it. Adhering to democratic standards is crucial in terms of belonging to the Western club. Hungary remains locked into the Western institutional order through the EU and NATO. Russia was

39 Rutland 2010, 162.

40 On the technologies of subverting and imitating the democratic political process in Russia and other post-Soviet countries see Andrew Wilson's (2005) classic study.

41 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights 2018, 17–20.

42 Derluguian 2011.

43 Inozemtsev 2011.

44 Jarábik 2017.

45 Magyar 2016, 62.

never a member but in 2006, when Surkov started spinning his doctrine, it was difficult for most to imagine the chasm of 2014. Regarding the issue of belonging to Europe, the Kremlin had always been deeply ambiguous, confirming Iver Neumann's classical thesis of Russia's *liminality.* Through clever discursive manipulations, it chose "to be simultaneously with, within and against the West", demonstrating "a fluidity and changeability of speaking positions."[46]

The political and identitary costs of openly breaking away with Western normative standards were thus simply too high (and for Orbán even more so, as, unlike Putin, he was subject to direct EU scrutiny). Therefore, the notion of democracy had to be subverted and diluted. In his seminal 2014 Tusnádfürdő speech,[47] which attracted significant international attention,[48] the Hungarian prime minister announced *illiberal democracy* as an alternative to the liberal democratic model that established itself in the West. In his new political philosophy, liberalism and democracy were not identical. On the contrary, liberalism had been suffocating democracy in the West, yielding what Orbán would, on another occasion, dub a "liberal non-democracy",[49] a political system that stamped out genuine political pluralism. In an interview to a Russian daily Orbán explained:

> "A situation has emerged in Europe in the past twenty years in which one of the three main intellectual tendencies – Christian democracy, social democracy and liberal democracy – has gained overwhelming dominance, and the followers of this tendency have monopolized democracy for themselves. This is why in Europe people are now allowed to say that democracy can only be liberal, but you are not allowed say that democracy can only be Christian democratic or that democracy can only be social democratic. I take the view that if any one of these competing ideas monopolizes democracy, it simply stifles intellectual debate."[50]

The role of the qualifier here ("illiberal") is more than justifying democratic backsliding with an argument to national or regional particularity. It is also clearly an attempt to wrestle the definition of democracy from Western Europe that has hitherto played the role of a model that post-Communist countries had to unconditionally imitate. If in Russia "sovereign democracy" chronologically preceded its return as a "conservative great power" claiming to guard "Europe's true Christian heritage,"[51] the doctrine of illiberal democracy – as something that supposedly provides genuine pluralism – was introduced in Hungary via the conservative-liberal (or globalist-nationalist) divide which of late has increasingly polarized politics globally. However, the overall discursive strategy of contesting the notion of democracy is certainly working according to the same logic by not rejecting but

46 Makarychev 2013.

47 Hungarian Government 2014.

48 Buzogány 2017.

49 Hungarian Government 2018.

50 Hungarian Government 2015d.

51 Neumann 2017, 78.

subverting and/or redefining it via what can be called a *relativist discourse* challenging one of the pivotal political concepts of Western modernity. As Viatcheslav Morozov put it in his introduction to the 2013 landmark volume analysing global democracy debates, "the precarious position of the concept of democracy in the current global discourse is very well captured by the post-structuralist notion of the empty signifier." Consequently, democracy has come to refer "to the totality of humanity as a whole, and thus indirectly to human nature. Being non-democratic in contemporary political discourse comes very close to being non-human. However, exactly because of its privileged position, democracy is used and abused by all kinds of political forces trying to fill it with their particular historical content."[52]

This struggle for discursive hegemony naturally comes hand in hand with resentment towards Western democracy promotion and the idea that the West is entitled to lecture the Rest on political standards. Moscow was growing increasingly *maidanophobic* from the times the post-Soviet space started experiencing colour revolutions, which the Kremlin believed were part of a Western conspiracy. Orbán followed in the Russian wake. Not only did he accuse civil society of being part of a Soros–funded conspiracy and not only did he praise authoritarian leaders for their economic success, he openly rejected the idea of a universal standard. "I challenge the assertion", he argued in an interview to the Russian *Kommersant*, that there is anyone in the world who can determine the only true description of democracy. (…) Why should the Russians build a political system like ours? Russian culture is different, it has its specificities. The Russians themselves will decide what they want – we cannot act like masters. Who authorised us to act like masters?"[53]

The argument to *culture* brings us to our last point in outlining the similarities between the two cases. In Russia, culture or *civilization* has traditionally been used as a counter-argument to Enlightenment universalism since the days of the Slavophiles, who claimed Russia was a civilization or a *cultural-historical type* distinct from the West and therefore also not subject to its political standards. The return of the so-called *civilizational approach* in post-Soviet Russia was predictably linked to the rejection of the Westernizer paradigm, according to which the natural course of events was for Russians to imitate and try to catch up with the West as its "pupil". Furthermore, it produced a kind of "civilizational nationalism", which "notwithstanding the uncertainty of very concept of civilization" typically used in Russian politics with the same purposes that usually belong to ethnic nationalism".[54]

Orbán's use of the concept of multiple civilizations was stimulated by his international migration agenda, as he repeatedly argued that cohabitation of people from different civilizations (i.e. Western Christian and Islamic) within one political system is undesirable

52 Morozov 2013, 5–6.

53 Hungarian Government 2015d. Orbán also used similar arguments with regard to other non-democratic countries.

54 Verkhovsky and Pain 2010, 172.

and practically unsustainable. Additionally, the ethno-nationalist component was also naturally stimulated by his increased attention to the issue of ethnic Hungarians abroad. But as regards democracy the civilizational argument has been used to underpin a doctrine of global cultural relativism. As the Hungarian prime minister put it during a 2015 conference with Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi:

> "We take the view that the methods by which we successfully organize our societies in the western world do not necessarily work well for civilizations in other parts of the world. It is not for us to decide on these matters; we are not schoolmasters for democracy."[55]

In this context, it is also worth noting that, apart from the implied cultural relativism, the civilizationist doctrine allows the Hungarian Prime Minister to be conveniently flexible on the topic of other religions. Depending on the context of his speech, he can either warn about the threat of a Muslim invasion or praise the wisdom of great Islamic culture, in particular, when meeting official representatives of Muslim countries. Thus, when speaking in Cairo, he even claimed that he believed not in a clash of civilizations, but in "human dignity "and Christian-Muslim co-existence and cooperation.[56]

This "flexibility" also rhymes very well with Orbán's increased interest in what he dubbed the "Eastern opening", i.e. the foreign policy doctrine of expanding ties with the non-Western (Eur)Asian powers – many of whom, like Turkey, are also predominantly Muslim countries. And, as Péter Balogh pointed out, ideologically, these foreign policy efforts "are also supported by new-old metanarratives such as neo-Turanism and other forms of 'Eurasianisms'."[57]

Curiously, Russia's present multicultural state, which includes Muslim enclaves such as Chechnya as well as other ethnically non-Russian peoples has also stimulated adopting the concept of a (Russian or "Eurasian") civilization to reconciling ethnic Russians with their cultural Others.[58] Thus, the use of civilizationism to combine the official emphasis on traditional (Christian) values with non-European or non-Christian heritages is another interesting point of comparison between Russia and Hungary, but elaborating on it would lead us too far away from our analysis of the "adjective game" and would most likely require a separate study.

55 Hungarian Government 2015e.

56 Balogh 2017, 193.

57 Balogh 2015, 201.

58 See: Kazharski 2019b, 89–97.

Regional Security Implications: The Regionalization of a "Mafia State"?

"His politics is pregnant with war. He will need to proceed from propaganda to real enemies, just as he came up with a magical story about the migrant threat, which secured his xenophobic majority. If he had an opportunity for military conflict, he would not hesitate."[59]

The words belong Miklós Haraszti, who spoke about his former friend and political ally Viktor Orbán in a 2017 interview to a Slovak daily. Whether such admonitions should not be taken *cum grano salis* is probably up to debate. It is true, however, that the Central and Eastern Europe's potential for conflict has far from disappeared, even if the region has been (partially) absorbed and stabilized by Western institutions.[60] Hungary, in particular, has had sensible minority-related tensions with Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. The 2010 law on citizenship allowed ethnic Hungarians of the Carpathian basin to claim citizenship without permanent residence in Hungary, which provoked Slovakia to ban dual citizenship.[61] Differences in context notwithstanding, Orbán's policy of handing out passports around his country's perimeter can be reminiscent of the earlier Russian approach. In the 2008 war with Georgia, the Kremlin justified its actions with a *responsibility to protect* its citizens in the breakaway republics – to whom it had previously issued passports.[62] (In 2019 *passportization* of the Ukrainian breakaway province was also announced).

As of the time of writing, most would probably agree that an irredentist war between Hungary and, for instance, Romania or Slovakia is inconceivable, owing in no small part to their membership in the EU and NATO. Orbán's public speeches, though they can make references to the Trianon trauma, steer clear of advocating territorial revisionism (though we may know less about what happens at Fidesz party meetings, behind closed doors). The prime minister regularly emphasized a spirit of cooperation between the nations of Central Europe, a region which he juxtaposed to the West. A new kind of Central European solidarity emerged, in particular after 2015, when the Visegrád Four made their joint *démarche* against the migration quota system. An alternative geopolitical imaginary that surfaces in the discourse is the Carpathian basin. It is an old geopolitical construct, understood as "the historical territory of Saint Stephen's Kingdom, traditionally dominated culturally and politically by Hungarian political elites."[63] The term allows to refer to territories populated by ethnic Hungarians without open revisionism – such as when Orbán talks of rebuilding regional infrastructure or extending social policies to the entire Hungarian community in the Carpathian Basin.[64]

59 Havran 2017.

60 See: Kazharski 2020.

61 Papp 2017, 18.

62 Delcour and Wolczuk 2015, 10.

63 Iordachi 2012, 49.

64 Hungarian Government 2017.

Logically, European integration also had a positive impact on the Hungarian minorities' status, owing in particular to the EU's minority protection standards and the Schengen Agreement which facilitates cross-border ties with ethnic kin abroad. The EU has therefore served as part of the answer to the Hungarian question. Yet, as scholars have observed, the minority issue has been instrumental to Fidesz as a "symbolic resource" in strengthening its nationalist image.[65] This fuelled "spiral of tensions" between Hungary and its neighbors, bringing to life politicized historical narratives of the troubled past.[66]

Orbán's ethnonationalism can be situated in the broader ideological frame of departing from liberalism and replacing it, in the words of his seminal 2014 speech, with "a different, special national approach".[67] So far, that approach has been a tactic of maneuvering between the exploitation of the minority agenda and the necessity to abstain from open irredentism. Looking back to the Russian case, the experience of the 2008 and, in particular, of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, one cannot safely assume that this ethnonationalism could not become a regional time-bomb – in particular if the capacity of NATO and the EU to reign it in should somehow decrease in the future.

A different type of regional security risks stems not from ethnic minority issues but from democratic backsliding and the formation of a nepotist regime inside the EU. As Bálint Magyar puts it, "Orbán's system approaches the Putin model of the mafia state by a detour, through the West, and establishes itself as a Trojan horse of the post-communist mafia states within the ramparts of the European Union."[68] This has several important implications. First, it means Budapest can back its clientelist allies in other countries and find various ways to provide support for their private interests and political agendas. Thus, in 2019 Macedonia's former prime minister Gruevski found asylum in Hungary after being sentenced to a prison term on corruption-related charges in his own country.[69] Notably, Gruevski shared important elements of Orbán's political ideology such as antisorosism.[70] In the previous year, it was reported that oligarchic capital linked to the Hungarian government had moved into Macedonian and Slovenian markets, purchasing local media assets.[71] By coincidence, 2018 was also the year when Slovenia experienced the rise of political forces openly backed by Orbán.[72]

65 Pogonyi 2015, 73.

66 Pytlas 2013.

67 Hungarian Government 2014.

68 Magyar 2016, 62.

69 Reuters 2019.

70 Zalan 2018.

71 Zgaga 2018; Jovanovska, Bodoky, and Belford 2018.

72 Hopkins 2018.

In sum, the nepotist "mafia state" can be seen not only as an instrument of private enrichment and domestic regime survival but also as an international political instrument, which can be used to construct *regional* networks of nepotism and export a state model whose political economy is made up of oligarchic clientelism and whose political ideology is right-wing "Orbánism". It makes Orbán "a model politician of the broader region" who is creating "'a sphere of influence' among nearby countries, both those that already belong to the EU and some that aspire to join".[73] Inside the EU, Orbán was successful in consolidating the Visegrád Four around his anti-migration platform[74] and served as an inspiration to Polish conservatives who famously aspired for "a Budapest in Warsaw".[75] There are also significant ideological overlaps between the discourses of Hungarian and Polish leaders, who often rely on similar ideological tropes, such as the declared need to protect national sovereignty from the "imperialist" EU.[76] Despite notable differences between the Hungarian and the Polish case, there can be no doubt about the existence of ideological sympathies which, naturally open up the possibility of mutual inspiration and/or diffusion.

It is true, on the one hand, that authoritarian diffusion has its limits. Voices have been raised against viewing the whole region "through the prism of the Hungarian and Polish experience,"[77] and scholars have argued,[78] for instance, the Czech political system looks robust enough to preclude the possibility of *a Budapest in Prague*. Yet, the growth of regional "mafia state" networks presents clear security risks. The EU is an entity which is both built on the rule of law and builds its security strategy on liberal democratic prosperity of the countries that it either welcomes as members or tries to draw into its orbit. Thus, on the EU's outer rim, its philosophy of stabilization through association and the project of building of a security community through external governance[79] can be seriously undermined by a *regionalization of the "mafia state"*. Meanwhile, inside the EU, Orbán's "externally constrained hybrid regime"[80] serves not only as an ideological inspiration but as a test case for other CEE politicians – to see just how much they can get away with without being sanctioned by the West. Orbán himself tested those limits through his so-called *pávatánc* or "peacock dance" – the strategy of what one may call two steps forward, one step back, selectively complying with EU demands while continuing to entrench his regime.[81] At this point, it is clear that Brussels' leverage *vis-a-vis* CEE members states is limited and cannot be compared to the strength of its pre-accession conditionality. This

73 Krekó and Enyedi 2018, 49.

74 Huszka 2017, 594.

75 TVN24 2011.

76 Csehi and Zgut 2020.

77 Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018, 245.

78 Pehe 2018.

79 Rieker 2016, ed.

80 Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018, 1.

81 Zgut and Csehi 2019.

is even more so when the problem gains a regional dimension, bringing to life opposition blocks of mutually supportive governments who vow to block each other's sanctioning in the European Council (e.g. Hungary and Poland). Here, the EU's institutional design was clearly not thought through to anticipate such situations. What's more, "hybrid regimes" may be more difficult to reign in as they act in a way "procedurally consistent with the letter of the constitution,"[82] while undermining democracy with informal methods, which do not give legal grounds for an EU intervention on behalf of the rule of law. One could, perhaps, argue that democracy in CEE depends not only on the EU's explicit power of sanctioning, but on the *inertia of compliance* with Western political standards. For CEE states unconditional compliance was a precondition of accession, but the sight of a hybrid regime successfully breaching it may well be putting an end to that inertia.

Finally, another set of security risks is associated with extra-regional actors and the opportunities that the game of adjectives can open to them. Hungary made it more than once to the list of countries that have been labelled "Trojan horses" inside the EU.[83] However, assessments have varied somewhat to the extent to which the building of illiberal democracy has made it an agent of external geopolitical players. Some analysts have dubbed Hungary "a state captured by Russia", with Orbán becoming a "tool" of the Kremlin.[84] Other studies seem to suggest a more ambiguous assessment, arguing that Orbán's increased Kremlinophilia is, in fact, interest-driven and does not involve a wholesale copy-pasting of the Russian authoritarian model.[85] From this perspective, Budapest can probably be seen as opportunistic rather than strongly committed to serving as Russia's "tool" in all instances. In any case, the "mafia state", publicly legitimized by the ideology of sovereignist illiberalism, certainly harbours security risks also in this particular respect. Russia aside, the Chinese – Hungarian connection has also been on the analysts' agenda. Thus, Chinese investments into Hungarian rail-road infrastructures lacked proper transparency and aroused suspicions that members of Hungary's ruling establishment benefited from a corrupt deal, that had left the nation severely indebted to China, but with very dubious benefits for the Hungarian economy.[86] "Mafia states" thus open additional opportunities to external actors, insofar as its networks can also stretch far beyond the territory of the EU or Central and Eastern Europe. Corruption can then be converted into a political instrument, used to supplement ideological influence and deepen existing regional divides. This is the nature of the "managed chaos" strategy that Russia, in particular, has been pursuing, as it worked to weaken the West through sharpening its existing political antagonisms.

82 Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018, 5.

83 Orenstein and Kelemen 2017.

84 Krekó and Győri 2017.

85 Buzogány 2017.

86 Keller-Alánt 2019.

In Lieu of Conclusion

We have exposed the similarities between the political doctrines of *sovereign* and *illiberal* democracy, as well as the broader cultural contexts in which they resonate, and the historical roots of populist, sovereignist discourses which reproduce these doctrines in their respective countries. We give an overview of our findings in Table 1.

It may be true, in the end, as many would argue, that hybrid regimes in Hungary and Russia are ultimately opportunistic and cynical when it comes to ideology. They share certain "distinctive mentalities",[87] part of which can be anti-liberalism, conspiracy-mindedness and xenophobia, but they are ultimately driven by their interests, i.e. the private interest of self-enrichment via the "mafia state", or even the national interest, but as they themselves choose to define it. Ideological similarities then become something which was somewhat superficial, and perhaps not worth examining in greater detail.

However, from the social constructivist point of view, political discourse matters regardless of whether actors occupying individual speaking positions are actually sincere in what they are saying (which may also change, as there, in the end, seems to be the effect of a propagandist eventually believing his own propaganda). In this sense, doctrines like that present a particular type of challenge to the established order, as seen in the broader context of the retreat of liberalism from CEE. They operate in subversive ways, introducing their own "mutation" into the DNA of liberal democratic institutions, not unlike a virus that infects a cell, weakening it and thereby exposing it to more serious threats. The fact that Russia travelled from "sovereign democracy" to Crimea in less than ten years is, probably, insufficient to make prognoses on future relations between EU member states located in CEE, but the similarities in relativist discourses on democracy are certainly worth examining in more detail.

87 Silitski 2009, 42–43.

	Russia	Hungary
Democracy qualifier	"Sovereign"	"Illiberal"
Historical legacies and geopolitical imaginaries	· Exceptionalism: Holy Rus', *antemurale Christianitatis* (Europe's shield from the Tartar Yoke). · Messianism, imperialism · Peripherality/liminality (Eurasianism)	· Exceptionalism: *antemurale Christianitatis* (the Medieval shield of Europe). · Messianism (civilizing the Carpathian basin) · Peripherality/liminality (Turanianism/ Eurasianism)
Territorial traumas	· 1917 collapse of the Romanov Empire · 1991 collapse of the USSR	· 1920 Treaty of Trianon
Transition traumas	· "Gangster 90's"	· Years of hardship
Others threatening sovereignty	· West · Liberals · Civil society, "Orangists" (Maidan revolutionaries) · Social liberals (LGBT)	· Liberals · "The Left", social liberals · Globalists, "Euro-federalists" · Civil society, Soros
Normative agenda	· Sovereignty · Traditional/family values, social conservatism · Economic nationalism	· Sovereignty · Traditional/family values, social conservatism · Economic nationalism
Culturalist arguments	· Russia as a separate "civilization-state" · Civilizationist relativism	· "The clash of civilizations" · Civilizationist relativism

Table 1: *Comparing Russia and Hungary: An Overview*

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