The ideational foundations of the illiberal backlash in Central and Eastern Europe. The case of Hungary

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Abstract

While the spread of neoliberal ideas through networks has attracted much attention worldwide, the ideational content of the recent counter-waves to liberal democracy has still received relatively little consideration. This article focuses on the ideational dimension behind the current illiberal backlash in Central and Eastern Europe. We ask how political conceptions critical of the Western liberal paradigm came about and what their main components are in Hungary, a country which is often seen as the avant-garde of the 'illiberal backsliding' in the region. The article shows that political illiberalism in Eastern Europe has intellectual underpinnings forged in conservative intellectual networks that have grown disillusioned with liberal democracy and neoliberalism long before the current illiberal political wave. Combining the reception of Western critiques of liberalism with a critique of post-communist liberals' perceived lack of willingness to break with the communist past, these intellectuals have slowly but continuously extended their networks and influence since the 1990s. Our analysis suggests that the contestation of liberalism is not reducible to political parties and instead should be approached as a broader phenomenon.

Keywords: illiberal democracy, ideational turn, Hungary, conservatism, neoliberalism, post-communist Europe, intellectuals

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1. INTRODUCTION

The idea that capitalism, neoliberalism, and liberal democracy go hand in hand appeared well-established during the years prior to the European Union's Eastern Enlargement (Ekiert and Hanson, 2003; Przeworski, 1991). While some had cautiously warned of the simultaneity of transitions (Offe, 1991), the conviction that liberalism and especially the 'free market' represents the panacea and holds the development program to pull Eastern Europe out of the dark communist age became textbook knowledge. It was characteristic not only of the Western discourse *vis-à-vis* post-communist countries, but also of the disposition of the region's new elites, an alliance between dissident intelligentsia and technocrats (Eyal, Szelényi, & Townsley, 1998). The 'neoliberal revolution' (Aligică and Evans, 2009) that swept over Eastern Europe made deregulation and attracting foreign direct investments to the main political goal of governments (Drahokoupil, 2009). The region has developed into a 'laboratory for economic knowledge' (Bockman and Eyal, 2002) for neoliberal ideas which were used to guide policy reforms in complex fields ranging from pensions (Orenstein, 2008), taxation (Appel, 2011), central banks (Epstein, 2008; Johnson, 2016) and healthcare (Roberts, 2009) to public administration (Randma-Liiv, 2008). The political economy literature subsumed these developments on Europe's periphery under different patterns of dependent capitalisms emerging (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012; Myant and Drahokoupil, 2012; Nölke and Vliegenthart, 2009).

However, when the financial crisis of the late 2000s brought austerity (back) to the region, this also forcefully challenged the validity of these neoliberal scripts (Appel and Orenstein, 2018). On the one hand, and rather unexpectedly, it gave new impetus to ideas about a further retreat of the state to the benefit of market forces (Varga 2015) particularly in those 'latecomer' countries that had gone furthest in following the neoliberal paradigm by cutting welfare spending throughout the transition (Ban, 2016; Bohle and Greskovits, 2012). On the other hand, however, neoliberalism has also become strongly contested by relevant political forces. Already from the mid-2000s on, political and academic elites in the two countries considered to be 'frontrunners' of liberal political and economic reforms, Poland and Hungary, grew increasingly critical of neoliberalism. A decade later, Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość - PiS*) in Poland and the Alliance of Young Democrats (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége – FIDESZ*) in Hungary would reach a strong grip on power, with FIDESZ being re-

elected in 2014 and 2018. In its most explicit formulation, the new anti-liberal spirit was formulated by Hungary's prime-minister Viktor Orbán in his infamous speech in summer 2014, which openly broke with the Western liberal paradigm.[1] Fused with economic nationalism (Johnson and Barnes, 2015), Orbán's conception of 'illiberal democracy' was explicitly directed against the liberal project based on Western templates (Ágh, 2016).

In this article we ask how this wave of illiberalism has emerged in a region dominated for two decades by liberalism (and by neoliberalism in economic policy). The recent social science literature has mostly focused on the enabling factors that paved the way for the 'illiberal backlash' in Eastern Europe. Explanations range from the exhaustion and internal contradictions of the 'liberal modernization paradigm' (Krastev, 2007; Rupnik, 2012) to problems related to institutional engineering during the early years of transition or the lack of real elite change (Pridham, 2014). Others have pointed to party system characteristics, such as increasing polarization and populism (Enyedi, 2016; Korkut, 2012; Palonen, 2009), features of authoritarian capitalism (Csillag and Szelényi, 2015; Scheiring, 2018), or the role played by external forces such as Russia or the European Union as factors explaining the illiberal backlash (Buzogány, 2017; Sedelmeier, 2014).

Our analysis offers a different perspective on this development and underlines the importance of the ideational dimension of the illiberal backlash. While the diffusion of neoliberal ideas through networks has recently attracted significant attention (Ban, 2016; Ban, Seabrooke, & Freitas, 2016; Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb, 2002; Helgadóttir, 2016; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015; Schulz-Forberg and Olsen, 2014; Weyland, 2005), possible illiberal counter-waves have yet received relatively little consideration even as the travails of liberalism in Central and Eastern Europe have been noted (see Korkut, 2012 for Hungary; Ost, 2005; Rupnik, 2012; Shields, 2012). Research on elites in Central and Eastern Europe has repeatedly underlined the role of intellectuals during state socialism and regime change (Bozóki, 1999; Konrád and Szelényi, 1979) or during the heydays of the liberal consensus (Fabry, 2017; Gagyi, 2016; Sebők, 2016). Many of these studies show how coalitions between old and new elites embraced the neoliberal consensus, but only recently has there been attention given to dissenting voices (Enyedi, 2016; Kopeček and Wciślik, 2015; Matyja, 2015). We complement this scholarship by turning to the conservative segment which became influential in the late 2000s but has received hitherto limited academic attention (but see Buzogány and Varga, 2019). More specifically, we ask how this conservative segment developed into an alternative conception to liberalism and what its main components are. In doing so, we situate

Viktor Orbán's rejection of liberalism in Hungary in a wider context: We show that a strengthening of intellectual circles opposing liberalism, broadly defining themselves as 'conservative' or simply 'right-wing', started already from the early 2000s onwards. Hungarian conservatives embraced a critique of the minimalist state not from a welfare perspective, but from one critical of the state's failure to define, pursue, and promote national interests.

The contribution follows the 'ideational turn' in the International Political Economy (IPE) literature and is particularly interested in the role ideas play in structuring political realities. We pay attention to the ideas produced by 'knowledge regimes' (Campbell and Pedersen, 2014) or 'organizational fields' of professional networks (scholars, policy experts) from think tanks, foundations, or universities to academic research centers. While research in this tradition has mostly focused on how such knowledge regimes filter neoliberal ideas, our contribution examines how the emerging conservative knowledge regime in Hungary articulated a radical rejection of liberalism. Our focus is on Hungary because the rejection of neoliberalism and liberalism in this country was both stronger and earlier than in other parts of Eastern Europe (Ágh, 2016; Kornai, 2015).

The article is in four steps. The first section reviews how the spread of liberalism (economic neoliberalism and liberal democracy) was conceptualized and theorized in the social science literature. In a second step, we show how Hungarian conservative networks emerged and strengthened in opposition to mainstream liberal ideas from the early 2000s on. We further discuss the central ideas of Hungarian conservatives: the opposition to what they term 'post-communism' and liberalism, and the promotion of national interests. We highlight here how local flavors are added to a loosely defined conservative script. In section 4 we briefly discuss the impact of conservative ideas in terms of policies and wider regional reach. The final part summarizes and points to new questions for future research on counter-waves to liberal democracy in Eastern Europe and beyond.

2. NEOLIBERAL DIFFUSION AND ITS DISCONTENTS IN EASTERN EUROPE

The intellectual dominance of liberal ideas in Eastern Europe was truly formidable: liberalism, understood to encompass both neoliberalism and liberal democracy constituted by far the best represented paradigm, prompting one observer to note that "[l]iberalism in this part

of the world became an obligatory syntax of political thought" (Trencsényi, 2014, p. 136, citing political theorist Aurelian Craiutu). Most countries in post-communist Europe combined economic neoliberalism in the form of pursuing 'country competitiveness' with the help of 'fiscal discipline' and open markets (Ban 2016, p. 10; Bohle and Greskovits 2012) with various aspects of liberal democracy, ranging from vertical accountability (free elections) to horizontal accountability (rule of law) (Bugarič and Ginsburg, 2016; Varga, 2013).

Two main explanations have been advanced for the sweeping diffusion of liberalism throughout the region. First, post-communist countries started transition exactly when neoliberalism was in the ascendancy (Appel and Orenstein, 2018). International financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, as well as Western universities and think thanks, recruited or offered targeted support to those local economists and policymakers that would help promote neoliberalism in the region (Ban, 2016; Wedel, 2001). Second, neoliberalism in Eastern Europe was closely entangled with its liberal democratic 'twin': in the face of skeptical voices warning about a mismatch between the simultaneous introduction of democracy and capitalism (Offe, 1991), Eastern European reformers and their Western advisors perceived neoliberalism as the ultimate means to dismantle communist power and introduce liberal democracy (Diamond, 1994). This meant that alternative voices and positions critical of the market project were deemed not just irresponsible, but also politically threatening (Ost, 2005). Such alternative positions were kept at bay through an alliance forged between reformers and the new managerial class through welfare spending targeted to minimize and pacify collective action (Greskovits, 1998; Vanhuysse, 2006), but also through political mobilization around national identity issues (Bohle and Greskovits 2012, Ost 2005).

How, then, could alternative ideas openly challenging liberal tenets, often referred to as the 'illiberal backlash' in post-communist Europe, emerge and – as in the case of Poland and Hungary – win formidable public support? Our explanation for illiberalism's rise in Hungary focuses on the intellectual networks constituting the ideational underpinnings of illiberalism in Hungary. The Hungarian intellectuals we discuss below were receptive to post-World War II Western conservative critiques of liberalism, such as those of Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, and this coincided with intensifying resentments among FIDESZ politicians over liberalism from the late 1990s onwards. But rather than considering Hungarian intellectuals as located merely at the receiving end of Western illiberalism, we find that the search for alternatives to liberalism was initiated by Hungarian intellectuals themselves. Later on, some of these

intellectuals would also play a leading role in formalizing networks that promote further diffusion of conservative thought in Europe, setting up think-tanks and extra-university institutes much like neoliberalism itself grew through the Mont Pèlerin Society before its advent in the US academy and public sphere (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015).

To understand this process, we draw on the 'ideational turn' literature in IPE (Béland and Cox, 2011; Blyth, 2002) and on related sociological work on the diffusion and translation of ideas (Djelic, 2008). We combine the focus on ideas with insights from the literature on 'knowledge regimes' (Campbell and Pedersen, 2014) and more broadly field theory. Field theory has been developed to explain changes in organizations (e.g. parties, multi-national companies), industry sectors, or social movements (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). This theory argues that actors are involved in societal fields marked by tensions between incumbents and challengers. Incumbents usually maintain their position by deploying certain conceptions of control or ideas about how to best do things in a particular field. Other actors attempt to challenge incumbents by developing alternative conceptions.[2] When developing new conceptions of control, actors often build upon and reinterpret models that are familiar and seem to function elsewhere. Such adaptation processes can be located in the tightly networked space of an organizational field and are marked by 'interpretative struggles' over the meaning of institutional solutions (Zilber, 2002). Actors with relevant resources play central roles by "creat[ing] a whole new system of meaning that ties the functioning of disparate sets of institutions together" (DiMaggio, 1988, p. 14). Their preferences and interactions are crucial for institutionalization processes. At the same time, and depending on their access to state apparatuses (Ban, 2016), local actors are also able to contextualize, translate, and theorize the available 'master ideas', which are taken for granted but remain rather vague in their details and are thus open for 'editing' (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) and adjustment for domestic use. Thus, the transmission of ideas can be conceptualized in terms of 'translation' (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, p. 6) – understood as a process of local adaptation or "construction of an identifiable and attractively 'packaged' form or idea" (Djelic, 2008, p. 13) – rather than just simple diffusion. This underlines the role of agency (in particular the mediation efforts) of the various actors involved, forming a "dense ecology of carriers [of ideas] and mediators of all kinds" (idem). In what follows, we offer an analysis of key concepts advanced by conservative Hungarian intellectuals throughout the 2000s and 2010s and trace these back to the field from which they emerged.

3. FIELDS OF CONSERVATISM IN HUNGARY AFTER 1989

An emerging conservative knowledge regime

The 'conservative renaissance' of the 2000s in Hungary was directed against the tacit 'liberal modernization pact' (Sebők, 2016) that moderate post-communists, liberal, and neoliberal intellectuals have formulated during the transition period. After the regime change in 1989, liberal forces gained parliamentary representation through the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), which was part of the dissident opposition before the regime change. The origins of the liberal intellectual network reach back to the early 1980s, when a thriving underground dissident scene was active in Budapest. One of the important groups were the so-called 'reform economists' from the Financial Research Institute (*Pénzügykutató Intézet*). Many of these economists would later form the core of the 'hard-core' neoliberal economist group that rose to political influence in the 1990s and 2000s as masterminds of economic reforms (Fabry, 2017; Sebők, 2016). The other important intellectual group within the liberal opposition was the so-called 'samizdat movement' which developed around the underground journal *Beszélő*. The *Beszélő* circle's activities continuously tested the limits of state repression not only by publishing a journal without the consent and censorship of the ruling party but also by engaging in several initiatives directly or indirectly calling for more democracy (Bozóki, 1999).

Both intellectual circles played a central role in the liberal SZDSZ, which came in second after the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in the first democratic elections in 1990. While the liberal wing of the SZDSZ emphasized human rights and moral politics and was represented by eminent dissident philosophers such as Gáspár Tamás Miklós or János Kis, who became the SZDSZ's founding president (Laczó, 2013), the neo-liberal economist wing developed a strong anti-state and separation-of-powers discourse, embracing a technocratic approach to modernization (Mándi, 2015). The amalgamation of these two undercurrents formed the core of the 'liberal modernization pact', which encouraged the 'de-politicization' of decision-making through independent expert bodies, including an independent central bank and 'democracy by the judiciary' (Szűcs, 2015). These elements also had important implications for state formation, e.g. for the preference of a consensual as opposed to a majoritarian model of democracy (Ágh, 2001), a strong and independent constitutional court (Scheppele, 1999), or the economic transition model chosen (Stark and Bruszt, 1998).

It was against this overwhelming presence of the liberal and neoliberal *zeitgeist* in transitional Hungary that conservative intellectuals had to establish themselves (Mándi, 2015). Compared to the liberal one, Hungarian conservative political tradition seemed outdated and parochial. For conservative intellectuals, the liberal dominance had to do with the liberals' stronger intellectual basis, their overwhelming media presence, and the much better international contacts they could build on. Conservative intellectuals, by contrast, were notoriously divided politically. Several intellectual circles claimed to build on Hungarian conservativism's rich historical heritage (Buzogány and Varga, 2019). In the late 1980 and the early 1990s, the dominant conservative current was the national Christian-conservative camp around Hungary's first democratically elected Prime Minister, József Antall. His political party, the MDF, was an assemblage of different groups including remnants of the interwar populist movement of folkish (*népi*) writers, national liberals, and far-right extremists. But it was the rightward reorientation of FIDESZ, an originally liberal party, that brought about the modernization of Hungarian conservativism.

Hungarian conservativism recovered during the 2000s, a period which was already marked by the agony of the liberal project (see Korkut, 2012 for a detailed account). Important breeding grounds for Hungarian conservative intellectuals were the social science departments at several Budapest universities or think-tanks (for parallels to Poland, see Matyja, 2015). While liberals and neoliberals of various leanings grouped around the Central European University (CEU) founded in 1991 by the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros[3], conservative intellectuals slowly gained power and positions in Hungarian academia. In addition to a continuous presence at Péter Pázmány Catholic University in Budapest, they also consolidated their presence at Corvinus, Budapest's second largest university. Beyond a strong focus on 19th and early 20th century traditions of Hungarian conservative political thought, important points of reference were the works of Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, or Carl Schmitt on the one hand and of Anglo-Saxon conservative classics such as Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott on the other. András Lánczi, perhaps the most prolific conservative intellectual, became a faculty member at Corvinus in 1991, head of the political science department in 2002, and the university's rector in 2016. Most of his academic career was dedicated to the philosophical study of the crisis of modernity, in particular by focusing on the works of Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin (Lánczi, 1999), including a Fulbright scholarship spent at the Eric Voegelin Institute at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.[4] In 2002, already as head of the political science department at Corvinus University, Lánczi authored the 'Conservative Manifesto', one of the rare programmatic statements of Hungarian conservatism. Tibor Navracsics, another key

conservative figure, joined Corvinus's faculty in the 1990s, working closely with Lánczi (Teczár, 2016). He later switched to the Political Science Institute of Budapest's largest university, ELTE where a slow strengthening of positions critical of liberalism took place around figures such as István Stumpf or István Schlett. When FIDESZ first came to power in 1998, some of these academics entered politics. Stumpf served as Head of the Prime-Minister's Office and became appointed by FIDESZ in 2010 as a judge to the Hungarian Constitutional Court. Navracsics first served as the Head of Department in the Prime-Minister's Office (1998-1999), then worked his way upward to become Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Administration and Justice (2010-14), Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2014) -- before becoming Hungary's EU Commissioner responsible for Culture, Youth and Sports in 2014.

An important role in establishing the networks helping conservativism to thrive was played by a specific feature of Hungarian academia: the system of specialized elite colleges (*szakkollégium*). Modelled after the French *grandes écoles*, these colleges were relatively free pockets of independent thinking during late state socialism. FIDESZ, for instance, was founded in the dormitory of the István Bibó College of the ELTE Law Faculty, where Viktor Orbán and large parts of FIDESZ's current leadership lived together. István Stumpf was a founding professor of the Bibó College and became in 1991, together with Viktor Orbán and other FIDESZ founders, the initiator of the think tank *Századvég* Political School which was to play a central role in reforming Hungarian conservativism.[5] Stumpf was followed by András Lánczi at the head of *Századvég* and attracted a number of young conservative academics with humanities backgrounds to the institute, including Gábor G. Fodor, an expert of early 20th century critiques of liberalism and a Voegelin scholar who became *Századvég's* research and later strategy director. Describing itself as the government's "Ministry of Thought" (Kovács, 2016), the Századvég Institute – to which we now turn – can be regarded as the core of an incipient conservative knowledge regime. Although still in its infancy if compared to the knowledge regimes that exist in Western Europe (Campbell and Pedersen, 2014), the Hungarian knowledge regime around Századvég has become a main recipient of government funding for policy communication and background research since 2010 (Juhász, 2017), and as such also the main non-governmental body of policy expertise (Erdélyi, 2016).

Monte Verità versus Mont Pèlerin

In August 2014, news about Viktor Orbán's "secret Bible" made headlines in the Hungarian media. Journalists have claimed that the sweeping reforms of the Orbán government followed the grand script outlined in Tilo Schabert's *Boston Politics*. *The Creativity of Power*

(Tóth, 2014). Schabert's book presents the politics of Kevin White, a famed Boston mayor between 1968 and 1984, to support his theory about the "primacy of persons" in politics. Schabert – a German political science professor, a former student of Eric Voegelin and the main custodian of his intellectual oeuvre (Gontier, 2015; von Heyking and Heilke, 2013) – was also head of the Eranos Society[6], an esoteric conservative intellectual circle with a long and illustrious history that gathered at the Monte Verità (Hakl and McIntosh, 2014) and can – with some exaggeration – be regarded as an intellectual antipode of the neoliberal Mont Pèlerin Society that convened at a nearby mountain.

The information that Viktor Orbán would follow a theoretical script was, to say the least, sensational: earlier analyses concluded that Orbán and FIDESZ were rather opportunistic and idiosyncratic in their choices of political direction and can hardly be pinned down to any political current, pursuing instead a loosely defined form of 'socially conservative' populism (Egedy, 2009; Kiss, 2002, p. 745). While the information is certainly exaggerated, *Boston Politics,* along with Eric Voegelin's and Leo Strauss's works, are important points of reference in the Hungarian conservative intellectual field (Flick, 2016; G. Fodor, 2010; Mándi, 2015; Tóth, 2014). More importantly, perhaps, the story about Schabert's Hungarian reception helps draw attention to the political ideas supported by *Századvég* and show the intellectual underpinnings of the 'illiberal' alternative to liberal democracy. In what follows, we rely on the existing literature to present three ideas figuring prominently in writings associated with *Századvég* and discuss the components of liberalism they claim to challenge.

Századvég exposed two lines of thought intended to challenge liberalism and what it depicted as a major component of liberal thought, namely institutionalism: On the one hand, there was a neo-Weberian critique of the minimal state, largely based on Western public administration scholarship and best embodied by Stumpf, the long-serving head of *Századvég* until 2010 (Stumpf 2009). On the other hand, by the end of the 2000s, Századvég had also produced a steady stream of essays that sought a more radical break with liberalism, a rejection of its ideas based on readings of Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and others. András Lánczi uses the term 'conservative' to describe this position and *Századvég's* leanings, and defines it as primarily referring to an opposition to modernity, liberalism, and socialism.

One starting point in the work of Hungarian conservatives is the overarching critique of liberalism both as an abstract ideology and a concept underpinning practical politics. A central argument against liberalism is the alleged erosion of authority brought about by liberalism's emphasis on individual rights across settings ranging from the family to the nation. Following

Carl Schmitt, one of the central ideas propagated against this tendency is to 'make politics political again' by bringing questions of power, personality, and the distinction between 'us' and 'them' to the forefront. The liberal focus on institutions thought to 'civilize politics'– constitutions, laws, courts – is seen critically. The same is true for liberalism's alleged tendency toward consensus and relativism.[7] Instead of regarding politics (and political science) as a theory of institutions, Lánczi highlights that politics is both institutional and informal (Lánczi, 2013). Along the same lines, his colleague G. Fodor argues that politics is 'human science' (*embertan*) and not the simple deployment of formal institutions. The importance of an informal 'invisible courtyard' of power paralleling a democratic government structures is also the central message that G. Fodor extracts from *Boston Politics*. This critique of 'institutionalism' is tied to a rejection of the liberal celebration of individual rights and freedoms, which needs to be replaced by a system that commits individuals to community-based virtues and a state that educates individuals to become patriotic citizens (G. Fodor and Stumpf, 2007, p. 8).

Behind the critique of liberalism as 'depoliticized politics', a more specifically Eastern European flavor is added by bringing Straussian and Voegelinian ideas to the region. Both communism and liberalism are understood as (failed) projects of modernity, which reinforce each other dialectically. For G. Fodor and Lánczi, understanding the nature of 'post-communism' is a question of central importance. In a 2009 co-edited volume, they claim that 'post-communism' is best understood as the continuation of communism and use the term 'Marxism' to depict the commonalities before and after 1989 by arguing that communism and liberal democratization and marketization share a quasi-religious *belief* in the power of reforms and progress (G. Fodor, 2009). Instead of 'reforms', G. Fodor pleads for 'renovation' and a return to governing, the 'ancient' meaning and duty of politics, a duty which he regards as being increasingly reduced or even negated in liberal thought. Importantly, he highlights that the dilemma of conservatism in Eastern Europe is to conserve or protect something that it first needs to recreate after being lost (G. Fodor 2009). In practice, this means stepping beyond 'post-communism'. The *Századvég* intellectuals differ in their explanations about how far and how deep the roots of 'post-communism' can be traced: Stumpf only dates them back to the start of bargained regime transition at the round table talks between the democratic opposition and the incumbent Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party in the late 1980s. Lánczi and G. Fodor dig much deeper and trace these roots back to the beginnings of modernity (G. Fodor, 2004; Lánczi, 2007). Lánczi denies that a 'real' elite change took place after 1990 and argues that privatization during the 1990s simply converted communist influence into economic power. While the question of elite change and recombination has been one of the most discussed topics in the

economic sociology of transition states (Eyal, et al., 1998; Stark and Bruszt, 1998), Lánczi used this argument to excuse the blatant corruption of allies of the Orbán governments, which became referred to in the Hungarian media as the 'Lánczi doctrine' (Bauer, 2016). Lánczi has been quoted in the *Financial Times* as explaining the necessity of a 'real' elite change that strengthens nationally-minded entrepreneurs: "Although [Mr Orban] has never said that, he perhaps encourages or allows that certain Hungarian entrepreneurs get really rich, to form the top of the Hungarian middle class" (Buckley and Byrne, 2017).

A third line of conservative critique focuses on problems of 'actually existing democracy', meaning both representative democracy in general and the post-communist political system established in Hungary following the 1989 round table talks in particular. This critique relates to questions about the 'quality of democracy' and the necessity of a 'hard government' (G. Fodor and Stumpf, 2007). Here, Hungarian conservatives take up the various Western narratives on the decay of modern democracy. An often cited contemporary reference is the work of Stein Ringen, a Norwegian Oxford sociologist, which develops an outcome-focused definition of democracy and contrasts this with procedural or liberal democracy (Ringen, 2009). *Századvég* intellectuals subsequently published a series of articles on the 'strong state paradigm' or the concept of 'hard government', criticizing the governance paradigm for diffusing power and depoliticizing essentially political decisions (G. Fodor, 2010). G. Fodor proposed to redefine the state around a moral, political leader acting as a self-assured, strongly masculine 'Prince of Chaosmos', which rules over Chaos and Order. This project of reaffirming the importance of the state and leadership means that the state has to regain moral authority and break with the liberal fiction that the state is unable to define its own national interests (G. Fodor and Stumpf, 2007). Consequently, according to Századvég intellectuals, the solution would be a 'neo-Weberian' state (Stumpf, 2009, 2014). This should replace the 'sell-out' of public assets and the excessive embracement of the ideas of 'new public management' by previous (socialist) governments (Stumpf, 2009). Instead of a 'lean' government which was seen to have served foreign interests to the detriment of public good, a new, centralized state is envisioned which should follow the ideal of an effective 'hard government' (Stumpf, 2009), capable of returning society to the normative orientation it lost during communism and 'post-communism'.

At first glance, conservative intellectuals' strong support of an 'active' state (G. Fodor and Stumpf 2007) is hardly reconcilable with those (Western) conservative ideas which harbor skepticism towards an 'interventionist' state. However, they are not too far from a Western

conservatism that accepts the return of the state in most societal areas to the extent that the state is an 'organic' extension of society and human nature, or, in other words, an expression of 'natural law' (Freeden 2006 [1996]). With Lánczi's argument that the dependence of large parts of the passive population on the state and their belief and reliance on social rights constitute one of modern Hungary's main problems,[8] Hungarian conservatives are far from envisioning an extensive welfare state. Rather, the conservative argument for an interventionist or 'active' state should be seen in the Eastern European context of post-communist 'state capture' in which the state is perceived as unable to deliver public goods and incapable of providing society with some kind of moral compass.

4. DISCUSSION: FROM POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY TO POLICIES AND WIDER REGIONAL IMPACT

FIDESZ's turn towards the politics of 'national interests' was facilitated by important intellectual voices that grew increasingly close to the *Századvég* Foundation throughout the 2000s. These intellectual voices assisted FIDESZ in constituting an incipient 'knowledge regime' (Campbell and Pedersen 2015) that breaks with the approaches of predecessor governments and the European Union and provides the intellectual defense for the actions of FIDESZ.[9] This does not necessarily mean that Viktor Orbán closely follows the plans designed by *Századvég*, but that the think tank assists FIDESZ as a "sense-making apparatus" (Campbell and Pedersen 2015, 3) helping it to frame the country's most pressing problems.

There are notable overlaps between many ideas of *Századvég* intellectuals and the content of the 'Proclamation of National Cooperation' (*Nemzeti Együttműködés Nyilatkozata*) and the 'System of National Cooperation' (*Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere*), two programmatic FIDESZ documents adopted by the newly elected, conservative-dominated Hungarian Parliament in 2010. The 'Proclamation', which is displayed on the walls of all public institutions, clearly distinguishes the period that started in 2010 from the 46 years of 'occupation and dictatorship' by Nazis, Communists and the 'tumultuous' transition years (1989–2010). The result of the 2010 elections is praised as yet another 'revolution', comparable to Hungary's anti-communist upheaval in 1956. The 'National Cooperation System' makes repeated use of concepts such as "bad government [or governance]" to describe the years of liberal and socialist rule, a key concept in the writings of G. Fodor and Stumpf. The parallels

between the two 'National Cooperation' documents and *Századvég* writings such as a defense of these documents by G. Fodor and other *Századvég* authors, entitled "The End of Ideologies" (G. Fodor, Fűrész, & Szász, 2010), suggest that *Századvég* group members functioned as important ideologists of the National Cooperation Regime (Böcskei, 2013), even if the authorship of the National Cooperation documents remains unclear.

In practice, the FIDESZ governments in power since 2010 installed a strong central executive replacing the 'lean' government structure that preceded it and that FIDESZ depicted as having served foreign interests (Gallai and Molnár, 2012). FIDESZ also halved the size of the parliament, reduced the number of ministerial departments, and reversed decentralization efforts carried out during the last decade to accommodate EU regional policy demands (Buzogány and Korkut, 2013). The independence of the judiciary and the press has been severely curtailed (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2012; Bugarič and Ginsburg, 2016). Economic policy underwent a major turn towards 'financial nationalism', meaning efforts toward "achieving and maintaining monetary sovereignty" (Johnson and Barnes 2015, 538). In practice, this has meant reversing pension privatization (Naczyk and Domonkos, 2016), abolishing central bank independence, and renationalizing economic sectors with strategic importance, such as banking, energy or public utilities (Johnson and Barnes, 2015). These policies were accompanied by a strengthening of the 'workfare' regime for segments of the society deemed 'unproductive' (Szikra, 2014) and a sweeping reorganization of social policies (Bohle and Greskovits, 2019; Lendvai-Bainton, 2017).

Despite some criticism (Stumpf, 2016), the *Századvég* group intellectuals firmly stood behind FIDESZ's reforms and mobilized to defend them from the massive criticism from Western Europe by establishing intellectual counterweights and mobilizing conservative support networks abroad. An example is the *Common Sense Society,* which was established in 2010 and organizes public events with Western conservative speakers, such as Tilo Schabert or Sir Roger Scruton of the American Enterprise Institute. A more recent addition is the *Danube Institute,* which was founded in 2013 and focuses on regional cooperation and the promotion of classical liberal and conservative thought. The institute is also closely connected with conservative think tanks such as the *Centre for Policy Studies* or the *Social Affairs Unit* (both located in London) which attempt to defend FIDESZ's policies in Western Europe and the US (O'Sullivan and Pócza, 2015).

Following Lánczi's initiative – who has also been critical of the inward-looking "provincial autochthonism" of the Orbán government – Hungarian conservatives have also sought

involvement in a pan-European conservative organization, the *Centre for European Renewal*, which unites conservative academics and politicians and publishes *The European Conservative*.[10] Networking efforts were particularly fruitful in developing relations with Polish conservatives close to the PiS party. Behind statements such as PiS President Jarosław Kaczyński' declaration in 2011 about "soon having Budapest in Warsaw" there is a longer history of exchange between conservative intellectuals from the two countries. Hungarian conservative thinkers such as Lánczi feature prominently in the programmatic volume "Plato on Wall Street. Conservative Reflections on the Crisis" (Kloczkowski and Price, 2014) of the Krakow-based think tank Center for Political Thought (*Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej*). Adding to this, several Hungarian 'heterodox' policies have served as templates for Polish reforms under the PiS government (Dąbrowska, Buzogány, & Varga, 2019; Piasecki, 2015). The resonance of the *Századvég* intellectuals' ideas in Poland should not come as a surprise, as these ideas fit well into what became a region-wide contestation of liberalism and contemporary Western-inspired democracy (Bugarič and Ginsburg, 2016).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the strong interest in the factors facilitating the 'illiberal backlash' in Central and Eastern Europe and its practical implications, there has been relatively little research on the ideational foundations of these developments. Focusing on what is arguably the most important example of illiberalism in the region, we have examined in this contribution the intellectual underpinnings of Hungary's embrace of 'illiberal democracy' following Viktor Orbán's return to power in 2010. Our approach has been to uncover the broader current of conservative intellectuals associated with the Hungarian right and examine the critique of liberalism that these networks have formulated.

The article has shown that the intellectual roots of the 'illiberal backlash' can be traced back to the period before 2010. Conservative intellectuals reacted to the 'liberal' emphasis placed in the early years of post-communism on checks and balances, individual rights, and judicialization of politics (Mándi 2015). Against these developments, conservatives pointed to the inherent contradictions and intellectual emptiness of liberal democracies. They criticized the liberal focus on formal institutions as a panacea for societal and political problems and re-affirmed the importance of 'anti-communism' (Lánczi 2007), of politicians wielding 'real' power, and of sovereign states capable of recognizing and formulating their own national interests. In this regard, Hungarian conservatives are certainly more nationalist and statist than

most of their Western European counterparts. At the same time, in terms of welfare state policy, conservative analysts are closer to Anglo-Saxon neoliberal templates that propagate an active workfarist regime based on moral considerations.

We have relied on sociological field theory to trace the development of conservatism in close relationship to the capacity of its exponents to challenge 'incumbent' liberalism that dominated the intellectual mainstream in Hungary until the 2000s. In turn, this capacity has developed out of the strengthening position of conservatives in the public sphere as a result of their consolidation in academia and think-tanks, which we described as an incipient conservative 'knowledge regime'. Indeed, it should not come as a surprise that illiberalism in the region has intellectual underpinnings. Here, our analysis documents an important similarity with the diffusion of liberalism throughout Eastern Europe: the importance of a strengthening hold on academia that pre-dates and prefigures political change and gives disparate ideas the guise of a coherent political ideology. But in contrast to the global diffusion of neoliberal ideas, which nevertheless had to rely on local 'translators' (Ban 2016), the conservative networks seem to be both more domestically rooted.

This contribution could offer only a first examination of conservative intellectual networks underpinning what might emerge as a global counter-wave to the global diffusion of neoliberalism. Illiberal ideas and rhetoric seem to arise not only in Central and Eastern Europe – as the example of Hungary and Poland shows – but also in Russia, Turkey, or even the US and Western Europe (Bluhm and Varga, 2019). A number of recent findings – including this contribution – suggest that illiberalism will only partially replace neoliberal thought while acting as its more mischievous twin (Johnson and Barnes, 2015; Lendvai-Bainton, 2017). Thus, further research is well advised to look more closely at the content and the echo chambers of illiberalism, i.e. the international dimension of illiberal diffusion, which are likely to develop horizontally and without a global blueprint.

NOTE

[1] See Viktor Orbán's speech at the 27th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp. 2016, Tusnádfürdő (Băile Tuşnad), July 23, http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/viktor-orbans-presentation-at-the-27h-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/

[2] One early application of field theory showed how the IT sector was deeply changed from a situation in which one organization, Apple, represented the incumbent holding the largest market share, to one in which IBM successfully challenged Apple by using a different conception about how things can be done in the sector: replacing a conception that tied software to hardware to one in which IBM would buy computer chips and software from other suppliers and thus revolutionized the sector to allow the entry of a multitude of new producers. (cf. Fligstein 2011).

[3] The CEU had both Tamás and Kis on its professorial staff. Other prominent figures include Lajos Bokros, who as a Minister of Finance initiated the famous austerity package of the 1990s, the so-called 'Bokros-package'.

[4] Lánczi himself has devoted an important part of his work to translating Leo Strauss's oeuvre into Hungarian, including his "Natural Right and History". Other prolific authors include the Burke and Oakeshott expert Attila Károly Molnár. For authoritative overviews of the field, see Mándi 2015 and Szűcs 2015.

[5] Századvég translates as 'fin-de-siècle'.

[6] Among the participants of the Society's annual meetings at the Monte Vérita were figures such as C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, Erwin Schrödinger, Gershon Sholehem, Martin Buber, or Eric Voegelin.

[7] According to an early (2003) interview with Lánczi: http://www.hetek.hu/belfold/200310/mellbe_vagott_liberalisok

[8] According to the same (2003) interview with Lánczi: http://www.hetek.hu/belfold/200310/mellbe_vagott_liberalisok

[9] The intellectual support for FIDESZ manifest in the writings of the Századvég members does not imply a lack of critique and frustration over government actions, which are seen by the Századvég authors as being too divisive. According to media reports, István Stumpf has become increasingly critical of FIDESZ after his appointment to the Constitutional Court while András Lánczi has commented critically on the radicalism of the changes introduced by FIDESZ, which from a conservative standpoint are conducive to further conflicts (Teczár, 2013)

[10] Lánczi currently chairs the Amsterdam-based organization that also includes members such as Roger Scruton and Polish PiS MEP Ryszard Legutko, a political philosopher.

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