Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism

Péter Krekó, Zsolt Enyedi

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Explaining Eastern Europe

ORBÁN'S LABORATORY OF ILLIBERALISM

Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi

Péter Krekó *is director of the Political Capital Institute and assistant professor of political science at ELTE University in Budapest.* ***Zsolt Enyedi*** *is professor of political science at the Central European University in Budapest.*

Three days after the 8 April 2018 election that gave his ruling Fidesz party another two-thirds majority in Hungary's unicameral 199-seat National Assembly, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán released a short video. It showed what he saw as the campaign's funniest moments. In the first scene, he is strolling down a hallway with András Patyi, the head of the national election-oversight authority. "I read in the papers that Patyi fined me," says a puckish Orbán—referring to a ruling that he had used children for campaign purposes without their parents' consent. "I feel really sorry, Mister Prime Minister," deadpans Patyi in response. Orbán brings up the matter twice more, each time chuckling about it.

This scene captures Hungarian politics and public life in the age of Orbán: The procedures that were originally designed to limit executive power survive, but only as a joke, and nearly all the country's decision makers belong to the prime minister's personal clientelist network. According to widely known rating agencies such as Freedom House, the Bertelsmann Foundation, the World Bank, and the Economist Intelligence Unit, Hungary is Exhibit A in the annals of democratic backsliding. As Freedom House recently concluded, "Hungary has registered the largest cumulative decline in Nations in Transit history, after its score has fallen for 10 consecutive years."[1]

Arguably, the political changes of the last decade have resulted in the establishment of a hybrid political system, in which the degree of power concentration is exceptional—at least in European terms.[2] Orbán and his party not only keep a firm grip on the legislative and executive branches, but also dominate virtually all spheres of social life, including commerce, education, the arts, churches, and even sports. The regime's "hybridness"

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reflects the uneven development of nondemocratic practices across various sectors of society. Certain subsystems—the courts, for instance—still operate with a large degree of independence, though the executive has been putting them under growing pressure. Other institutions, such as the prosecutors' offices and the state media, function as ruling-party outposts.

The foundations of the current Orbán regime go back to the period just after Fidesz's 2010 electoral landslide, and were consolidated when parliament adopted a new constitution that came into effect on the first day of 2012. Still, the 2018 election was widely seen as a crucial test. As Assembly Speaker László Kövér said before the 2018 voting, "We have rebuilt the country from the cellar to the roof. . . . If we are able to govern successfully for four more years, many of our changes will become irreversible not only in Hungary but, through our example, across Europe."[3]

Indeed, helped by gerrymandering and a divided opposition, Orbán won his third straight two-thirds majority with a whopping 133 seats. Fidesz improved on its 2014 vote share by four points, going from 45 to 49 percent. The party won 91 of the 133 seats elected by plurality rule in single-member districts (SMDs). With turnout an impressive 70 percent, the opposition could not repeat its custom of blaming its loss on voter apathy. Fidesz managed to bring almost half a million new voters to the polls—an enormous number in a country of ten-million people—and achieved its second-best electoral result ever.

Jobbik, a party that had begun moving from the far right toward the center in recent years, held onto its base with 19 percent of the vote and 26 seats. Yet its leader, Gábor Vona, had promised victory. Following the disappointing result, he resigned. The new leader, Tamás Sneider, officially follows Vona's "moderate" line, but himself is an ex-skinhead and retains ties with extremist groups, illustrating how relative the term "extreme" can be.

The divided leftist and liberal parties were unable to increase their share of votes. The coalition formed by the Socialists (who had led the government in 1994–98 and 2002–10) and Dialogue for Hungary (a small green party) gained only 12 percent, with a pair of other green and liberal parties picking up an additional 12 percent between them. All told, the left's vote share was only around 30 percent, showing the huge imbalance that has characterized Hungarian politics for almost a decade.

Fidesz did an excellent job of mobilizing its large voter base, but this happened with the help of significant state support. As they had in 2014, monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe noted that the state apparatus and the governing party had campaigned in tandem. The elections were free, but not fair. Also amplifying the Fidesz advantage were a media establishment that purveyed blatantly false news regarding migration and terrorism; a State Audit

Office that handed stiff fines to opposition parties; and an Office of the Prosecutor-General that refused to investigate major corruption cases involving Fidesz loyalists.

The Fidesz regime's stability rests on more than a tilted electoral playing field, however. It does have some genuine support from the people. For more than a dozen years, the ruling party has regularly led its closest competitor in opinion polls by fifteen to twenty points. Hungarians rose up against communist rule in 1956 and embraced democratic reforms in 1989. They enjoy the secret ballot, face no threat of violence, live in a country belonging to that club of democracies called the European Union, and get news from journalists who need fear no jail time. Yet these same Hungarians tolerate and indeed vote for an increasingly autocratic regime.

Wider Trends and Country-Specific Factors

Although the Hungarian populists' ideology has paternalist features that set them apart from other populist parties, Hungary's case is part of a larger trend. The nationalistic turn in Hungary has undoubtedly drawn legitimization from the Western world's larger shift toward identity politics. The general backlash against political correctness and "gender ideology" led the Hungarian leaders to realize that there is nothing inevitable about the growing influence of progressive-liberal values.

These global changes have re-amplified the authoritarian characteristics of Central and East European political culture, especially the prevalence of "hierarchy values" over the values of egalitarianism, intellectual and affective autonomy, and mastery (ambition, daring, and the like).[4] Low social trust and disillusionment with democracy and capitalism have made it hard to build a civil society robust enough to defend pluralism.[5] The antiliberal climate engulfed even the region's strongest economic performers, such as the Czech Republic. There, Miloš Zeman won reelection to the presidency in January 2018 by whipping up fear of refugees in a country that hosts no refugees. In Poland, trends similar to those in Hungary are apparent as well.

At the same time, the region is not monolithic. In Slovakia, even strongman Robert Fico had to step down as premier when March 2018 protests over the murder of an investigative journalist became more than he could handle. In Romania, demonstrators have triggered a number of changes of government in recent years, and the Baltic states have bounced back from a devastating financial crisis without abandoning liberal democracy. We cannot blame Hungary's declining democracy scores on the international context.

In the building of Hungary's illiberal regime, three factors proved especially prominent. The first of these was the electoral system, with

its strong majoritarian element dating to the time of the postcommunist transition. Unlike its Eastern Bloc neighbors, Hungary chose not to adopt a new constitution after communism fell, but instead amended its 1949 basic law. The remodeled constitutional order, although it featured a significant separation of powers, nonetheless allowed a two-thirds majority of parliament to make major institutional changes. The framers had assumed that no single party would ever win such a majority. They turned out to be wrong.

In the 2010 election, their mistaken assumption had massive consequences. Although Fidesz won only 53 percent of the popular vote, this was enough to give it a 68 percent majority in parliament. At that time, the National Assembly had 386 seats, and Fidesz won 263 of these. This supermajoritarian outcome built on a modest popular-vote majority came about because Fidesz swept parliament's 176 SMD seats, winning all but one of them. The framers' "will never happen" had happened.

Fidesz exploited its legislative dominance by unilaterally changing the constitution and replacing key officials in every politically relevant institution. Checks and balances were erased as the staffs and workings of the once semi-autonomous Prosecutor-General's Office, Electoral Commission, State Audit Office, Fiscal Council, state media, and Constitutional Court were radically transformed. All fifteen of the Court's current members bear appointments that postdate Fidesz's rise to power, and nearly all are loyal to Fidesz. Public broadcasting and the national news agency were subsumed under the authority of a new government-dominated body. It was the "seat-bonus" giving Fidesz a 68 percent "constitutional majority" in parliament that made all this possible.

Fidesz also used its dominant position to make the electoral system even more majoritarian. Although in both the 2014 and the 2018 elections Fidesz failed to win more than 50 percent of all votes cast, it both times secured a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

The second factor was the raw, disheartening memory of the turbulence that had roiled the country between 2006 and 2010. In May 2006, incumbent Socialist premier Ferenc Gyurcsány told a party gathering that the government he was heading had accomplished nothing despite four years in power, and had been lying to voters about it. When an audio recording of the speech became public in September, a crisis erupted. There were demonstrations marred by violence, some of it caused by demonstrators and some by police. Then in 2008 came the world economic crisis, triggering IMF-imposed austerity measures. Just before the April 2010 election, one polling expert observed that "even in a region where disillusionment [with democracy] is common, Hungarians stand out" for their level of distrust.[6] Orbán and Fidesz capitalized on the discontent, promising more justice, efficiency, and democracy while vowing to remove ex-communist elites from state institutions. In the

eyes of many Hungarians, Fidesz and Orbán—like Vladimir Putin after the Boris Yeltsin years in Russia—offered the best hope for security and stability following chaotic times.

The third prominent factor was and is the presence of a charismatic political leader. It is not too much to say that the post-2010 regime draws its legitimacy from the personal authority of Viktor Orbán. Born in 1963 and raised in a small town in west-central Hungary, Orbán began as a student activist fighting for democracy. He has been on the political front lines since 1988, repeatedly demonstrating his skills as an orator, manager, strategist, and intriguer. Coming from a modest background and earning a law degree from a prestigious Budapest university (he also did a brief stint studying at Pembroke College, Oxford); befriending worthies such as the German politicians Otto Graf von Lambsdorff and Helmut Kohl; and winning early fame as a 35-year-old prime minister in 1998, Orbán embodies the aspirations of many Hungarians. For a large segment of society, his story is the nation's story, and the barbs launched against him by foreign critics simply mark yet another chapter in the old tale of Hungary's long, lonely walk through history. As Martin Fletcher has put it, "Orbán's unashamed nationalism, blunt speaking and brazen defiance of Brussels resonate in a country for which the 20th century was a litany of humiliations."[7]

What Does Orbán Want?

Although some liken him to a real dictator, the truth is that Orbán's political character cannot be understood apart from the logic of competitive electoral politics. Unlike many authoritarian leaders, Orbán does not aspire to be the "father of the nation." His goal is to polarize and divide the electorate while retaining the support of the biggest and best-organized group within it. His means are often nondemocratic, but the logic of his behavior is quintessentially competitive. His unparalleled ability to mobilize supporters is Fidesz's top electoral asset.

Orbán is no Vladimir Putin, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, or Hugo Chávez, none of whom could fill any conceivable political role aside from that of ruler. Instead, Orbán and other past and present leaders like him in the region are party chiefs (and often party founders) who feel at home with democratic electoral contests. The others include Macedonia's Nikola Gruevski, Montenegro's Milo Đjukanović, Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, Slovakia's Robert Fico, and Slovenia's Janez Janša. In early June 2018, Orbán and his state-run media gave Janša a huge boost in snap elections, making his party the Slovenian parliament's largest and putting him in position to form a coalition government.

The personal skills and ambitions of these leaders fuel their urge to push for an executive-dominated, delegative form of governance. Meanwhile, it cannot be denied that this push meets a certain level of

demand for strongman rule that exists among their respective national electorates. The longing for strong states and (re)established national sovereignty lends an air of respectability to the personal ambitions of these political entrepreneurs. Their supporters see their fights for unconstrained leadership as quests to reclaim past national glories.

Once it secured power, Fidesz could rely on certain institutional mechanisms and political configurations to help it maintain sufficient popular support. The most important of these is one that has been "present" by its absence: Serious cases of high-level corruption have had no legal impact. Measures such as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index suggest that corruption has become systemic in Hungary since 2010—indeed, the regime's engine is nepotistic corruption. At the same time, however, the number of high-profile corruption prosecutions has dropped to almost zero. Much of the judiciary retains its autonomy, but some judges have been forced into early retirement while the power of the new National Judiciary Office (run by the wife of the Fidesz politician who wrote most of the 2011 Constitution) continues to grow.

The opposition, meanwhile, remains haunted by its own past corruption scandals. Law-enforcement agencies periodically investigate and interrogate opposition figures in ways designed to draw maximum publicity. The public has come to see corruption charges as ritualistic parts of party politics, even if nobody noteworthy ever seems to go to jail for corrupt dealings.

The opposition's chief trouble is that it is so divided. Fidesz managed to firm up the loyalty of its voter base before the 1990s were over, and has never lost it. The rest of the party system, by contrast, has long been fragmented—a crucial liability in a majoritarian electoral system. Willingness to attempt cross-party coordination rose somewhat between 2014 and 2018, but each of the elections bookending that period saw multiple opposition candidates vying against one another in numerous SMDs.

Orbán also has benefited from a favorable economic environment, aided by an ample flow of money from the EU. By 2017, the Fidesz government could point to 4 percent annual growth; a stabilized budget and national debt load; a repaid IMF loan; a rise in real income of more than 10 percent per year across 2016 and 2017; and both lower inflation and lower unemployment.

There are also downsides to Orbán's economic record, however. The government achieved stabilization by nationalizing private pension funds (worth about 8 percent of GDP); cutting welfare spending for the poor; depleting research and education budgets; and levying taxes (on banking and other service sectors) that drove away foreign investment. The current 4 percent growth is in fact smaller than the value of EU transfers, which total 6 to 7 percent of GDP. Experts looking at these

downsides remain unenthusiastic about the government's economic strategy, but so far voters have been relatively content.

Another edge for Orbán has been the toothlessness of the Western institutions that have been critical of him. Some political scientists call Orbán's rule an "externally constrained hybrid regime,"[8] but the external constraints are weak. The European People's Party—the mainstream center-right group in the European Parliament—continues to recognize Fidesz as a member in good standing despite the sharp decline in the quality of Hungarian democracy. While Orbán's rule in many ways resembles that of past East European leaders such as Slovakia's Vladimir Mečiar, Romania's Ion Iliescu, and Macedonia's Nikola Gruevski, his governance—unlike theirs—seems to be compatible with continuing EU membership, and therefore can claim a prestige that they never could have achieved. Europe is trapped in a form of "authoritarian equilibrium"[9] where the political and economic advantages of keeping an increasingly authoritarian regime within the EU still exceed its disadvantages.

Brussels finds itself in an awkward position. It is sending money to an illiberal, Euroskeptic government in Budapest that makes political hay by denouncing the EU while happily watching EU funds flow in. And if some of this EU largesse ends up in the pockets of Hungarian oligarchs and members of the prime minister's personal network (including his son-in-law), Brussels seems able to do little about it.[10] Orbán's reputation among mainstream European politicians has deteriorated over the last decade, but he is more pragmatic than, say, Kaczyński in Poland, and has a sense of when and how to compromise that has fended off effective sanctions.

The Fidesz regime benefits not only from the EU's carrots, but from its sticks as well. Penalties and admonitions from Brussels allow Orbán's government to present itself as the shield of Hungarian national sovereignty while rallying citizens around the flag. Having a direct political mandate from the people, the government can easily question the legitimacy of foreign politicians and EU bureaucrats and paint them as hostile agents against whom the country needs a shield.

A "Cultural Counter-Revolution"

Fidesz has overseen a well-funded effort to change the hearts and minds of Hungarians. Since 2015, the government has spent more than 100 million euros to convince voters that a hidden network led by George Soros, the Hungarian-American investor and philanthropist, is working to bring millions of Asian and African immigrants to Europe.[11] The goal of the anti-Soros campaign has been to promote what Orbán and Kaczyński in 2016 called a "cultural counter-revolution."[12]

In order to help promote such propaganda, Fidesz has built a media

empire of its own. As of 2017, the Fidesz media juggernaut included all of Hungary's regional newspapers; its second-largest commercial television company and second most popular news website; its sole national commercial radio network; its only sports daily; its only news agency; and a large number of papers that purvey what can only be called yellow journalism. Lavish state funding ensures that the juggernaut can grind on without regard to what actual consumers are willing to pay for. Copies of newspapers are often made available free of charge at train stations and other public places, and the regime's radio and television outlets reach nearly every household. Their advertisers are frequently government-owned companies or government agencies.

The government-organized Hungarian press paints the West as an apocalyptic place where immigrants pose constant threats, the rule of law has collapsed, and a miasma of political correctness smothers free speech.

Hungarian governments have always directed ad spending toward ideologically friendly media organs, but what has been in evidence since 2010 has no precedent. A typical example of the propaganda apparatus is the weekly *Figyelő* (Observer). Its owner is a government consultant, and it receives about 70 percent of its advertising revenue from the state. These outlets not only play a role in shaping the political climate, but also function as disciplinary instruments. *Figyelő,* for example, published a list of more than two-hundred people (mainly academics and human-rights activists) whom it called "mercenaries" hired by Soros.[13] Government ad placement of course also suggests to businesspeople eager for state contracts where they should spend their own ad budgets. The upshot is a "government-organized media"—some of it state-owned and some private, but all under the control of Fidesz and its allied oligarchs.

The state's overt "information campaigns" also shape the communications environment. In 2017 alone, about US$250 million went to pay for billboards, leaflets, television ads, and mass mailings by means of which Orbán attacked Hungary's "enemies" such as Brussels and George Soros.[14] This sum was several times the official amount that went to pay for the Leave campaign the year before in the United Kingdom.[15] Advertising content and Fidesz campaign slogans often literally match, but parties' formal campaign spending is capped while government ad budgets are not. Anti-immigrant and anti-Brussels appeals received approximately $50 million from the state budget in 2017.[16] Posters denouncing refugees began appearing in June 2015, after the first wave of them arrived.[17]

The government-organized Hungarian press paints the West as an

apocalyptic place where immigrants pose constant threats, the rule of law has collapsed, and a miasma of political correctness smothers free speech. Between 2014 and 2015, Hungary saw an increase in anti-foreigner sentiment that was, according to some studies, the highest in Europe.[18] The proportion of Hungarians who would allow an immigrant to enter the country fell to less than 10 percent, the lowest level in Europe.[19]

Fidesz propaganda has strengthened anti-Western and pro-Russian foreign-policy attitudes. Pro-Western opinion remains strong, but a shift in the opposite direction is taking place. In one recent survey, 51 percent of Fidesz voters said that in choosing a strategic partner for Hungary, they would prefer Russia to the United States.[20] Among Hungarians, Vladimir Putin is more popular than Angela Merkel or Donald Trump.[21] Hungarians today fear Russia less than they fear Brussels and George Soros.

Before the government's media campaign against Soros began a few years ago, the Hungarian public had scarcely heard of him. Then the Fidesz spin doctors seized on the Hungarian-born billionaire's potential as a handy enemy figure. They began depicting him as the head of a vast conspiracy uniting NGOs, the opposition parties, critical media, and international organizations. In a number of countries (including some in the post-Soviet space), Soros has been treated as a symbol of destructive liberalism, but nowhere outside Hungary has he become an official obsession and the target of a years-long smear campaign.

It is not hard to see how Soros's promotion of "open society" ideals and his funding for rights, transparency, and pro-minority groups might vex an increasingly authoritarian government, but in the Hungarian case there may also be something personal at work. Soros was one of Orbán's first mentors (a Soros-funded scholarship paid for his sojourn at Oxford), and Soros's active presence is a reminder of Orbán's ideological U-turn. During the 2018 campaign, any organization with even remote ties to Soros became subject to attacks not only in the media but also through legislative initiatives. The government went so far as to call its bills aimed at constraining civil society the "stop Soros package." After the 2018 election, the Soros-supported Open Society Foundations moved their regional office from Budapest to Berlin in order to escape the Orbán government's hostility.

Observers often call the anti-Soros campaign an instance of anti-Semitism. No doubt the image of a Jewish financier running a worldwide conspiracy is a familiar anti-Semitic trope, and the designers of the campaign were fully aware of the popular reactions triggered by billboards across the country saying, "We shall not let Soros have the last laugh." It would be wrong, however, to interpret the state's propaganda in ethnic or racial terms. Relations between Hungary and Israel have never been stronger, and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu—another well-known Soros foe—has supported the campaign.

In parallel with it, Orbán began speaking more about the need to fight anti-Semitism, and justifying his policies against refugees in part by invoking the need to protect Hungarian Jews from attacks by Muslim immigrants. The main advantage of the campaign against Soros is not that he is Jewish, but that he can be built up as an "umbrella enemy"—the puppet master allegedly pulling the strings of all the government's foes, including the NGOs, the critical media, the opposition parties, and the EU. This recipe recently worked in Slovenia, too, where the anti-Soros, anti-refugee narrative exported by Orbán helped Janša to his abovementioned showing.

The refugee and migration question was central in the 2018 electoral campaign. Unlike in 2014, economic issues hardly figured. Baldly put, the central Fidesz claim was that Brussels and Soros were scheming to flood Europe with Muslim migrants, and that a Fidesz loss would mean the doom of white, Christian Hungary. Could such a campaign have worked outside of good economic times? It is hard to say. What we do know is that in 2018 this campaign strongly succeeded. Before the refugee crisis, Fidesz's popularity was on the decline. After it, Fidesz not only recovered but added half a million new voters.

The economic factors converged neatly with the cultural arguments. Inequalities have continued to widen in Hungary under the Fidesz government, and leading figures in and around Fidesz policies are not so modestly building their wealth. A symbol of this latter phenomenon is Lőrinc Mészáros, an old friend of Orbán and a onetime pipefitter who is now miraculously one of the country's richest people, with a net worth that *Forbes* in late 2017 estimated at close to $400 million.[22] Despite income disparities, Orbán increased his popularity among the poor, largely by exploiting their identity-based fears. At the same time, many poor people received access to employment (though only through public-works programs) while their children received free hot meals in the schools and kindergartens. As the parliament elected in 2014 neared the end of its term, moreover, the poverty rate started to fall. Citizens who were otherwise victims of Fidesz's policy shift to a flat tax were grateful for these developments, and they worried that a change of government could deprive them of state protection. Many citizens, especially in smaller towns, also feared that if they voted for the opposition this might become known and cost them their jobs and subsidies. Finally, they were worried that if asylum seekers were let in, state support would be redistributed to the newcomers.

What Comes Next?

Hungary's democratic backsliding is the product of many factors, few of which are unique to Hungary. This is not a comforting thought: What happened in Hungary could happen elsewhere too. Given a ruling

party willing to bend the rules in its own favor and a weak, fractured opposition, it is hard to see where political change can come from. There are NGOs that have been surprisingly efficient at organizing large rallies, but the government's legal and propaganda campaigns against them have rendered their position very fragile.

Can the opposition parties learn to pull together? They do seem to realize more keenly than before that the "narcissism of small differences" among them has been a pillar of the Fidesz supermajority. In February 2018, all the opposition parties rallied behind a single mayoral candidate in a southern town known to be a Fidesz stronghold. The win scored by this candidate, an independent local entrepreneur with strong conservative credentials, suggested a winning formula. In general, however, the opposition remains too much a Budapest phenomenon, without the local structures outside the capital that it will take to challenge the ruling party. That party, meanwhile, is becoming increasingly successful at controlling the parliamentary opposition, which is coming to resemble the sham "opposition" to Putin's United Russia party in the Russian State Duma.

In foreign affairs, Orbán will most likely keep up his East-West balancing act, trying to make the most of EU and NATO membership while cementing his hybrid regime ever more firmly into place. Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Azerbaijani leaders will continue to find receptive partners in Hungary. In January 2018, Orbán said that an EU funding cutoff would turn him toward China.[23] Three months later, Hungary became the only EU country that refused to sign a statement criticizing China's Belt and Road Initiative.[24]

Orbán's illiberal model has been having a major impact not only in Central and Eastern Europe, but in the Western Balkans as well. In an increasing "soft power" attempt, Orbán is reaching out to countries in the Western Balkans, and, mostly successfully, supporting local (mainly right-wing) strongmen in Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and (as we have seen) Slovenia. Along with Hungary's government-organized media, Hungarian energy companies have been expanding their Western Balkan presence. Orbán, as a model politician of the broader region, has been spreading his ideology and working on creating a "sphere of influence" among nearby countries, both those that already belong to the EU and some that aspire to join.

Hungary has become a successful laboratory of illiberal governance. Fidesz has remodeled the country's institutions to suit ruling-party purposes. Identity politics and conspiracy theories abound, as state-funded media churn out fake news. Given the positive voter feedback regarding all this, we should expect it to continue.[25]

Can pressures from outside change that? Budapest's relations with both Brussels and Washington are at a low point. In early 2017, the European Parliament began proceedings that could take away Hungary's voting rights, though this is not a likely outcome. A more realistic sce-

nario envisions the European People's Party moving to strip Fidesz of its membership, which would weaken it domestically. Orbán has had to work constantly to strike the right balance between advantageous provocations and necessary concessions. Until now, when forced to choose between the East and the West, he has always chosen the latter. Yet the West has never succeeded in forcing him to compromise on his drive to centralize power.

NOTES

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