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Cultural Policy as a Tool of Democratic Erosion: A Comparative Analysis of the Populist Electoral Success in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic

Maja Anita Jankowska

Master in International Studies (M.Sc.)

Supervisor:

PhD, Tiago Fernandes, Associate Professor

ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon

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Department of History

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Abstract

In the past decades, the Central and Eastern European region has witnessed a significant surge in the rule of populists enacting changes that undermine the liberal democratic order. In Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, a steep decline in democracy scores in the last years correlated with the populist parties coming to power. In 2023, however, Hungary is considered an electoral autocracy; in Poland, autocratization stalled before democracy broke down; and the recent elections brought the Czech Republic back towards a democratic direction. This dissertation aims to understand why such differing levels of democratic erosion occurred despite the similarities in the countries' recent history. The comparative analysis of the process of democratic transition, the development of political systems, and the context of the electoral success of Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and ANO 2011 in the Czech Republic motivates a further study of the country-specific cultural, social, and historical factors. A hypothesis is drawn that the cultural policies developed by the governments of Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland provided narratives that justify the introduction of illiberal changes, have a mobilizing effect in terms of identification and electoral support, and curtail the freedom of expression by punishing voices of dissent in both countries. This dissertation emphasizes the need to consider the role of culture in the processes of democratic transition and consolidation and contributes to a more comprehensive evaluation of the mechanisms of democratic erosion.

Keywords:

Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Populism, Democratic Erosion, Cultural Policy, Suppression of the Arts

Resumo

Nas últimas décadas, a Europa Central e Oriental viu um aumento significativo no domínio de populistas que minam a democracia liberal. Na Hungria, Polónia e República Checa, a queda na democracia se correlacionou com os populistas no poder. Em 2023, a Hungria é considerada uma autocracia eleitoral, enquanto a Polónia viu a autocratização estagnar antes de uma deterioração democrática, e as eleições recentes devolveram a República Checa à democracia. Esta dissertação busca entender as diferentes erosões democráticas, apesar de histórias semelhantes. A análise comparativa da transição democrática, sistemas políticos e o sucesso eleitoral do Fidesz na Hungria, PiS na Polónia e ANO 2011 na República Checa motiva um estudo dos fatores culturais, sociais e históricos específicos. A pesquisa apoia a ideia de que as características checas tornaram o país resistente à viragem iliberal. Uma hipótese sugere que políticas culturais na Hungria e Polónia justificam mudanças iliberais, mobilizam apoio e restringem a liberdade de expressão ao punir dissidentes. Ambos governos atacaram o setor cultural, reconhecendo sua importância para a comunicação democrática. O estudo enfatiza a necessidade de considerar a cultura na transição democrática e contribui para a compreensão dos mecanismos de erosão democrática.

Palavras-chave:

Hungria, Polónia, República Tcheca, Populismo, Erosão Democrática, Política Cultural, Supressão das Artes

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Index of Abbreviations

AFI	Artistic Freedom Initiative
AFM	Artistic Freedom Monitor
ANO	(Akce nespokojených občanů) Action of Dissatisfied Citizens
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
ČSSD	(Česká strana sociálně demokratická) Czech Social Democratic Party
FIDESZ	(Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége) Federation of Young Democrats
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
KDU-ČSL	(Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová) Christian and Democratic Union/Czechoslovak People's Party
KSČM	(Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy) Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia
MDF	(Magyar Demokrata Fórum) Hungarian Democratic Forum
MMA	(Magyar Művészeti Akadémia) Hungarian Academy of Arts
MSZP	(Magyar Szocialista Párt) Hungarian Socialist Party
NMHH	(Nemzeti Média- és Hírközlési Hatóság) National Media and Infocommunications Authority
ODS	(Občanská demokratická strana) Civic Democratic Party
PFI	Polish Film Institute
PiS	(Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) Law and Justice
PSL	(Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe) Polish Peasant Party
SLD	(Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej) Democratic Left Alliance
SLAPP	Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation
SZDSZ	(Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége) Alliance of Free Democrats

1. Introduction

In recent years, Central Eastern European countries have been affected by the tenure of populist leaders and a resulting democratic regression (Freedom House, 2023). These recent developments came as a surprise to many international observers, as the region once symbolized a collective aspiration towards democratic transition and integration into Western institutions following the collapse of communism. Nations such as Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, bound together by common historical experiences and geographical closeness, first appeared as rays of democratic optimism, supporting reforms focused on the market, pluralistic politics, and the goal of joining the European Union (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Their achievements were heralded as proof of prosperous post-communist shifts in the direction of liberal democracy. Over time, however, cracks started showing as liberalism failed to gain mass support and appeal to the majority of the post-communist populations (Vachudova, 2020). While the scholarly consensus before 2008 considered that most Central Eastern Europe (CEE) countries reached the stage of “democratic consolidation” (Cianetti, Dawson, & Hanley, 2018), Western observers fell short in grasping the specific characteristics of the region and its young democracies which could eventually stand in the way to a “full transition.” The democratic model did not meet all social expectations, and the frustrations of parts of society have been embraced by populists (Wojtas, 2011). In this context, populist parties could present themselves and their politics as a solution to the shortcomings of liberal democracy, promising to fix the mistakes of their predecessors (Zielonka & Bednarek, 2018).

Under these circumstances, Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz won a parliamentary majority in the 2010 elections in Hungary and soon started with the implementation of policy shifts that challenged liberal democratic principles. In a similar vein, the 2015 election in Poland resulted in a majority rule of the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość - PiS) led by Jarosław Kaczyński. Rapid disintegration of the rule of law ensued, with changes that included constitutional amendments, media control measures, judicial reforms that compromised independence, and restrictions on civil society. In 2017, in the Czech Republic, the coalition government led by Andrej Babiš’s ANO (Akce nespokojených občanů - Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) captured state administration and policymaking for oligarchic interests and profited from unconstitutional favors from President Miloš Zeman. Parallels have been made in scholarly analyses of the developments in the three countries since they all won power as mainstream conservative parties, and having radicalized while in government, shared methods, and goals for undermining independent institutions. This process of democratic deterioration has been defined as democratic backsliding or democratic erosion (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Kneuer, 2021; Vachudova, 2020).

Annual democracy reports (V-Dem, Freedom House) indicate a steep decline in democracy scores of the three states in the last decade that correlates with each of the populist parties coming to power. In 2023, Hungary was considered an electoral autocracy; in Poland autocratization stalled before democracy broke down, and the 2021 elections brought the Czech Republic back towards a democratic direction (Papada et al., 2023). The comparison between the parties reveals that while the populists in each country criticized the elites and the established liberal-democratic system, what differentiated Babiš's ANO was the lack of a strong ideological programmatic approach. Fidesz and PiS emphasized their role in achieving national unification, understood within a narrow national-religious rhetoric. New cultural policies that reject liberal values have been proposed.

Viktor Orbán openly stated his intent to employ a cultural approach as a strategic means to put his anti-democratic objectives into action (Babarczy, Jonson, & Erofeev, 2017). The PiS government announced the need to reinforce national cohesion while resisting the alteration of tradition by what is commonly referred to as "contemporary political correctness" (Pawłowski, 2016). In both cases, cultural policy development supported narratives that justified the introduction of illiberal changes. Building on national traditions and strengthening national pride provided the space for national identification, which added a mobilizing effect in terms of electoral support. In effect, these changes have significantly curtailed criticism and freedom of expression, limiting the plurality of opinions and representations of alternative voices – establishing discursive hegemony in public life and, consequently, contributing to democratic erosion (Sethi, Bankston, Jurich, Putti, & Monterroso, 2022; Sethi, Bankston, Jurich Joscelyn, & Vadot, 2022).

The governments of Hungary and Poland strategically recognized the arts and cultural sector as a pivotal instrument for the ruling parties to define and advance nationalist identities and discourses. By pluralizing forms of political communication, the arts and popular culture can enable many citizens to exercise their share of popular sovereignty (Love & Mattern, 2013). The arts contribute to democratic communication and social economy, fostering the critical and creative dialogue a democratic society needs (Human Rights Committee, 2011). Since creative expression can be a significant tool for questioning and criticizing the established order, Fidesz and PiS took measures to limit plurality in the arts. Since both countries are bound by international legal obligations to uphold the principles of free expression, Poland and Hungary have set out to transform the arts and culture not by acting as a censor, like their communist predecessors, but by controlling cultural institutions and the media. Both countries have also employed legal mechanisms to intimidate artists and cultural workers and enacted media laws that facilitate the governments' influence on public discourse. In this environment, many non-conforming artists choose to self-censor to avoid prosecution or public condemnation (Sethi, Bankston, Jurich, et al., 2022; Sethi, Bankston, Jurich Joscelyn, & Vadot, 2022). As a result, the cultural politics of Fidesz and PiS have not only eroded democratic principles by curtailing the freedom of expression but also acted as a legitimizing strategy to maintain their grip on power.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation aims to explore cultural policy, specifically its use for the attacks on the arts and culture sector, as a mechanism of democratic erosion. The comparative analysis of the political systems and the rise of power of Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and ANO in the Czech Republic serves as a backbone to the understanding of the role of cultural politics in the populists' grasp and maintenance of power. It is worth noting that within academic discussions of democratic regression, this empirical observatory has remained mainly unexplored until the release of the Artistic Freedom Monitor reports prepared by the Artistic Freedom Initiative in 2022.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters to provide a comprehensive examination of the importance of cultural policy as a solid ideological basis (legitimizing narrative) for the electoral success of populist parties and a mechanism contributing to democratic erosion. The first chapter explores the transition to democracy in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic and its implications for the formation of the political systems in each country. A critical examination of the shortcomings of liberal democracy and the societal reactions follows. The second chapter investigates the socio-political context of the populist parties – Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and ANO in the Czech Republic – coming to power. The evolution of party systems and significant political events that contributed to the electoral successes of these parties are discussed. This discussion is presented separately for each country, examining the context of their rise to power, subsequent elections, and examples of enacted illiberal changes. Furthermore, this chapter explores the degree of democratic erosion and its implications. It provides a theoretical foundation by introducing the concept of democratic erosion. The third chapter explores historical, cultural, and political factors that explain the political developments discussed in the previous chapters. The role of religion and the Catholic church in each state, the approach to national identity, as well as the building blocks of national traditions, are discussed to understand the essential characteristics that differentiate the political cultures and mentalities of the electorate of Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. This analysis explains why and how distinct kinds of populism developed – national populism in Hungary and Poland and technocratic populism in the Czech Republic. The last chapter discusses Fidesz's and PiS's cultural politics. In the first part, parallels are drawn regarding the “culture wars” between liberals and conservatives that defined the public opinion of the last three decades in both countries. The second part describes the implementation of new cultural politics in the arts and culture sector. Next, mechanisms of the takeover of the arts and culture sector are presented and discussed for Fidesz and PiS separately. Lastly, similarities and differences between the cultural politics of both governments are covered. The dissertation ends with a conclusion which offers a summary of the critical observations, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Democratic Transition and the Development of the Party System

The following chapter discusses the process of democratic transition in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, respectively. The latter part considers the reactions to the democratic transition and the perceived shortcomings of liberal democracy.

2.1 Negotiated Agreement and the First Free Elections in Hungary

In Hungary, the Communist Party, increasingly led by reformists on one side and an organized democratic party opposition on the other side, negotiated an agreement that the next government would be produced by free elections. Starting in 1988, various self-organized groups emerged as new actors – such as the Independent Forum of Jurists, the independent interest representation organization of entrepreneurs, or the Union of Scientific Workers. Members of these social movements began organizing into protopolitical parties, such as the Federation of Young Democrats (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége - Fidesz) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége - SZDSZ), paving the way for a democratic multi-party system.

Unlike any other Eastern European round table, negotiations leading to the free elections were between the regime and an already constituted political society, not civil society – avoiding a power-sharing formula. In these first free elections, the largest of the opposition Round Table parties – the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum - MDF) won the most seats and formed a coalition government with a strong parliamentary majority. However, the acceptance or refusal of political bargain between communist and opposition elites has become a primary dividing line of the political scene in Hungary for the years to come (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

The main points of critique surrounding the talks included exclusivity, the limited scope of interest that failed to include discussions on economic reforms, the level of power retained by the ruling communist party, and the lack of transparency in the decision-making process. Critics argued that the Round Table Talks did not result in a thorough break from the old system, and certain institutions and power structures of the previous regime persisted and hindered a more comprehensive transition to democracy (Bollobás, 1995).

Nonetheless, the political shifts led to multi-party elections, a new constitution, and a transition from a centrally planned economy to a free market economy. The new democratic system established in Hungary after 1989 featured a three-tiered structure: The President, a ceremonial head of state; the Prime Minister, who held executive authority; and the National Assembly, a unicameral parliament responsible for legislation (with 199 members). The judiciary operated independently, with the Constitutional Court ensuring the legal conformity of the National Assembly. Guided by a democratic constitution, the system emphasized individual rights, multi-party participation, and freedoms such as speech and press.

Economic reforms included privatization, the removal of price controls, a focus on market-oriented policies, and liberalization of foreign trade. While these changes brought progress, western imports flooded the country, and many domestic enterprises collapsed because they were not competitive enough, leading to unemployment (Richter, 2019).

The first two elections brought the same six parties to parliament: the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), heir of the Hungarian communist party; the national-conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF); the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP); the Christian-conservative Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP); the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ); and the liberal youth party Hungarian Civic Alliance - Fidesz led by Viktor Orbán. In 1994, the election led to the victory of the Socialist Party, revealing attitudes of voters toward the market reforms introduced during the previous four years – opposition to the free market economy and the predominance of private property and nostalgia for government redistribution of income (Bollobás, 1995). By 1998, the divisions that cut through the multi-party political system had become bipolar, with all major parties belonging to either the “Left” or the “Right.” The two-party blocs emerged due to a consistent pattern of coalition formation among parties, polarized on cultural and symbolic issues (such as religion, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and, more recently, sexual minorities and immigration) (Vegetti, 2019). In 1989, everyone in the opposition united in the common goal of taking down the communist regime. A few years later, political tensions came to the fore, and the division between Western-oriented, urban, pluralistic liberals and Hungarians rooted in a more rural and nationalistic tradition resurfaced.

The new constitution included a complete set of regulations intending to strengthen the new democratic order, its stability, and governability. Bozóki (2015) argues that the inclusion of the qualified majority rules had adverse effects on a broad range of policy issues. The belief prevailed that freedom could be safeguarded by increasing the number of decisions that required a qualified majority vote. In effect, the ruling government's power was solidified between elections, and removing an incumbent government through external means became nearly impossible. Due to the large number of qualified majority rules, the government in power had to rely on the opposition to make decisions on fundamental issues. Paradoxically, while the constitution greatly increased the government's power, it simultaneously curtailed its political responsibility, leading to major consequences for the development of the party system in Hungary. Commentators point out that what had once been a “one-party state” was replaced by the state of democratic parties. This system vested democratic authority predominantly in political parties, often sidelining the public's welfare in favor of party interests. The escalating alignment of voters with political parties and the polarization of the party system fostered an environment that many Hungarians likened to a “cold civil war” between left and right factions. Moreover, parties assumed civic roles such as organization of movements, public benefit foundations, or civic circles. The system lacked independent experts, and all issues had to be settled only through the parties and their clientele.

Corruption, thus, has become a significant issue (to this day, Hungary has no fair party finance law, nor are there strict rules against the conflict of interests within the decision-making bodies controlled by political parties) (Bozóki, 2015).

2.3 The Solidarity Movement and Poland's Pacted Transition

Poland's transition to a democratic system began with the Round Table Talks led by the leaders of the Solidarity movement in 1989, which resulted in the partially free parliamentary elections. The Solidarity movement, initially a trade union and an anti-communist movement, later transformed into a political party and played a major role in shaping the post-communist system.

A pacted transition took place in which the old regime retained a strong position in the legislature, the state apparatus, and the constitution. The new structure featured a President as the head of state, a Prime Minister as the head of government, and a bicameral parliament consisting of the Sejm (460 members in the lower house) and the Senate (100 members in the upper house). The judiciary gained independence, with a Constitutional Tribunal overseeing legal adherence (Dajczak, Nieborak, & Wiliński, 2021).

Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that the pacted transition delayed Poland's complete democratic transition, and the legacy of its path had an unforeseen yet harmful effect on Poland's efforts to create the political institutions necessary for democratic consolidation. The negotiated settlement preserved the existing structures and allowed some former communist officials to retain positions of authority, which hindered a complete break from the previous regime (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Extensive investigations or prosecutions of communist officials for their past actions, including human rights abuses and political repression, were not pursued. Critics argue that this lack of accountability prevented a full reckoning with the communist era and denied justice to the victims of the regime. Moreover, citizens' involvement in civic movements gradually decreased over the years, and scholars point out that the success of the Solidarity movement depended on the specific circumstances of that period and did not indicate a maturing democratic culture. For many social groups, the time of transformation was an enormous trauma that led to a rapid disintegration of the Polish civil society (Lubecki & Szczegół, 2007).

Regarding the development of the party system, the first free elections in 1993 saw twenty-nine parties represented in the Sejm, making it difficult to form a government or even a coalition for a program, as eleven fractions were only represented by a single parliament member. The fragmentation in the political scene caused a change in the electoral ordination in the next parliamentary elections but also led to the general perception of chaos and disorder compared to the "orderly" ways of the communist system. The relations between the prime minister and the directly elected president became conflictual, with charges and countercharges of non-democratic intentions. The apolitical style of

Solidarity, which struggled to form a clear programmatic self-definition, contributed to its fragmentation into many small parties and its waning power as a political force in 1990-92 (Leder, 2021).

While public opinion held a belief of unity in the fight against the common enemy (the communist party), friction within the organization had been present since its creation. The ideological differences split the members into two halves. The liberal wing embraced a Western-style liberal democracy and a market-oriented economy, seeking to transform Poland into a modern, Westernized State and perceiving clericalism as a threat to the state, and it included figures such as Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń (creators of the first independent newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*). The conservative wing emphasized the preservation of traditional values, including Catholicism and national identity, and it was represented by Lech Wałęsa and, among others, the twin brothers, Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński. Growing tensions and animosities among the organization led to internal divisions, eventually resulting in a startling failure in the 1993 elections (Krasowski, 2012). The conservative faction of ex-Solidarity could not reach a consensus and put forth multiple electoral lists, which led to a division of votes that did not cross the electoral threshold. A third of Polish voters remained unrepresented in the Sejm. As a result, the Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej - SLD) and their Polish Peasant Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe - PSL) allies achieved a surprising victory, followed by the election of a former communist, Aleksander Kwasniewski, as President in 1995 (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

The transformation period's divisions shaped Poland's political scene for years to come. The fragmentation of political elites in Poland led to the deep polarization of society and fundamental political divisions – into the “post-Solidarity” camp and the “post-communists” in the 1990s and two competing versions of a national community after 2001. Moreover, due to the communist party’s involvement in creating the 1997 Constitution (valid until today), the document, which could have been an emblem of Polish democracy, has become a divisive issue, often criticized and attacked by the conservatives (Leder, 2014). The argument of its formation having its source during the tenure of ex-communists has been used by Law and Justice to introduce changes to the document. The topic of post-communist legacy and the work of completing the transformation has been present in the electoral campaigns of the right wing, and the liberal democrats, as well as the left, have been accused of having ties to communists (Leder, 2021).

2.4 Czech Republic’s Regime Collapse

Czechoslovakia, in sharp contrast to Hungary and Poland, experienced regime collapse. The country experienced extensive repressions due to the 1948 Communist coup, followed by decades of harsh, dogmatic Stalinism. This motivated the emergence of a parallel culture of independent thinkers who tried to ‘live in truth.’ The screenwriter and future president, Vaclav Havel, writing in 1984, spoke of

thousands of people of all sorts and conditions gathered under the umbrella of ‘parallel culture,’ who were led to it exclusively by the incredible narrow-mindedness of a regime that tolerated practically nothing. Eventually, as a consequence of ten days of public demonstrations led by students and artists in protest of police brutality (“the Velvet Revolution”), the hardline regime collapsed, and power was transferred to a provisional government led by Havel, who was the most prominent leader of the civil society opposition. In contrast to both Hungary (social movements turned into political parties) and Poland (workers’ movement and organized political opposition), the democratic transition in Czechia saw the emergence of protest groups in civil society that were small, unorganized, and antipolitical. The provisional government that emerged as a result of the Velvet Revolution had strong anti-politics tendencies and rejected an opportunity to develop statewide political parties (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

The 1990s political transformation consisted of the restoration of parliamentary democracy with the abolition of the leading role of the communist party, recreation of the multi-party system, and the organization of the first free elections. In 1989, Czechia was still part of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic – a voluntary union of the two equal republics of the Czech and Slovak nations based on the right of self-determination of each, but a peaceful separation took place in December 1992 (Holy, 1996). In the 1990s, the state became a parliamentary representative democracy with an electoral method of proportional representation - used for electing deputies to the lower chamber of the bicameral parliament - which endorses pluralism and a multi-party system in the country. Members of the upper chamber are elected to the Senate from single-seat constituencies in two-round, runoff voting, and their task is to check and confirm (or possibly veto) the decisions of the lower chamber. The transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy involved privatization and restitution (Pridham, 2009).

In contrast with the situation in many other countries of the former socialist bloc, the introduction of a market economy and the restitution of private property in Czechoslovakia were relatively swift, successful, and welcomed by the majority of the population. Only 9 percent were opposed to the introduction of a market economy. The view that the economy had to be restructured to avoid its eventual collapse predated the political change, and it had ideological connotations: the transition to a free market was presented as the realization of the goal of the Velvet Revolution (Holy, 1996). Over the years, however, the lack of clear legal regulation led to corruption and clientelist structures in non-transparent business practices in the emerging dominant political parties and the growing dissatisfaction of the general public with the party system (Janík, 2010).

Contrary to Poland and Hungary, which experienced polar reconfigurations of their main parties, confusion among the split parties, and the emergence of new parties, the main party actors in Czechia did not change in the first two decades post-1989. Their actions were essentially predictable, with little electoral volatility. The party system was composed of four major parties: on the right it was the Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana - ODS), created in the late 1990s, the Czech Social

Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická - ČSSD), the leftist Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy - KSČM) – with continuity since the 1920s, and a small Christian and Democratic Union/Czechoslovak People's Party (Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová - KDU-ČSL) in the center. These parties were supplemented by smaller formations of a predominantly liberal orientation. The main points of contention between the parties were mainly related to economic policies. Differences existed in the approach to economic transformation, with some advocating rapid privatization and market liberalization, while others favored a more gradual approach. Stark ideological differences, present in the evolving political systems of Hungary and Poland, did not emerge in the Czech Republic (Balík & Hloušek, 2016).

2.5 Disillusionment with the Democratic Transition and the Shortcomings of Liberal Democracy

The legacy of 1989 has been written mainly in terms of the triumph of liberalism and democracy, with significantly less attention to some of its negative consequences. The reactions to the transition differed between Hungary and Poland, and the Czech Republic.

Already in the 1990s, the exclusive character of the Round Table talks inspired the feeling of being left out of the decision-making process in both Poland and Hungary. In contrast, in the Czech Republic, it was the people's direct involvement in the Velvet Revolution that led to the regime collapse. Mass demonstrations in Prague estimated the participation of 750,000 people (in a city with a population of 1,200,000), which soon spread to other cities and towns (Chlup, 2020). For this reason, the perception of the democratic transition had been more positive among Czechs during the initial stages.

One of the primary aims of the Velvet Revolution and the political and economic changes that followed was to “return Czechoslovakia to Europe.” The national traditions were invoked to foster the confidence that the Czechs, as a democratic, cultured, and well-educated nation, rightfully belonged to the West. These ideas dominated the election campaign in June 1990, and the transition to a market economy was construed as a necessary part of the Czech's re-entry to Europe (Holy, 1996). It is important to note that Czechoslovakia's communist regime did not implement any economic reforms, nor did it receive foreign credit from the West (contrary to Poland and Hungary), which resulted in fewer international economic pressures and turned to be an advantage during the democratic consolidation phase with Czech society experiencing less shocks than Hungary and Poland (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Conversely, spectacular economic reforms that harmed the interests of large social groups led to the intensification of feelings of frustration and disorientation both in Poland and Hungary. The high costs of the transformation and the shock it had entailed made a large part of the society feel alienated and retreat from public life to the safer sphere of private life, with an increasing distrust in the state.

While at the beginning of the 1990s, most Poles highly valued the democratic system, public opinion surveys showed that this trend only lasted until the end of the 20th century. With time, the worsening image of politicians, parties, and public institutions led to an increase in the number of people dissatisfied with how the political system functioned and convinced that citizens had no real influence on the decisions made by the state authorities (Łabędź, 2006).

Similarly, in Hungary, the 45 years of communist rule led to the homogenization of Hungarian society at the lowest level, with living standards lowered to where everyone could be 'equal.' After 1989, opportunities multiplied for entrepreneurs, businessmen, and skilled professionals as the market for skills has become complex, rewarding outstanding talent, performance, or vision. The rest, especially those dependent on the state, had been left out and grown frustrated. Public opinion polls in 1995 revealed the perception of a free parliamentary system with its debates and arguments as chaotic and the one-party system with a unified party line that used to be 'in order.' The victory of the Socialist Party in 1994, a surprise for international observers considering Hungary's first cabinet did not contain any communists, indicated the general population's nostalgia for the communist past (Bollobás, 1995).

In Poland, even civic movements like Solidarity did not move forward with a thought that would reinforce a long-term left-wing perspective and a labor-focused character supporting the working class. The liberal rhetoric of the 1990s stripped the majority of the population of their symbolic capital. Many did not know how to cope outside the 'industrial farm,' and some were left in a hopeless situation – for example, inhabitants of small towns in which the only factory was shut down due to the closure of state-owned enterprises (Leder, 2014). The introduction of market reforms led to cutbacks in social services and welfare programs, and the reductions in state support for healthcare, education, and social assistance once again hit the lower classes. In 2002, more than 43% of the respondents expressed a view that the reforms of the system brought "more harm than benefit." (Marszałek-Kawa & Plecka, 2015). Masses of people felt abandoned and deprived of meaning, recognition, and dignity. These feelings fueled resentment towards the social strata that benefited from the transition and the political elites (Leder, 2021). The impressive rise of GDP per capita from 50% to 69% of the EU average (between 2000-2015) was accompanied by economic stratification. The scale of income inequality in Poland has become one of the highest in Europe (Eatwell, Kurylak, & Goodwin, 2020). Following the events of 1989, it was expected that the state would offer proactive measures to aid the reintegration of individuals affected by the transition into society. However, this anticipated support was not realized, leading to the absence of a well-structured, consistently executed, and adequately funded social assistance system in Poland. (Kalita, 2023).

Over time, class resentments became a breeding ground for national ideology as it can offer a refuge in the feeling of a strong sense of influence and importance. Right-wing parties have recognized the need for symbolic meaning by fostering a sense of national identity in their target voters, focusing on

the symbols of suffering and injustice (Leder, 2014). These sentiments, lingering in the collective consciousness, came to be repeatedly exploited by populist parties, with promises to finish the work of the ‘failed’ democratic transition both in Poland and in Hungary. Conversely, the opposition has struggled to find a symbolic identity and concentrate on ways to tackle growing inequalities.

3. The Rise of Populism and Democratic Erosion

The following chapter investigates the socio-political context of Fidesz, PiS, and ANO coming into power, as well as the degree to which their politics weaken the existing democracies. First, the concept of democratic erosion lays the theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis. Second, a discussion of the evolution of the party systems, along with the critical political events, explains each party's success. The parts are divided by country, and each consists of the context of the parties gaining support, leading to election and re-election, and the examples of enacted illiberal changes. Third, the degree of democratic erosion and its implications are elaborated.

3.1 Democratic Erosion

The global decline in the levels of democracy in the last decade sparked an academic debate around the problem of democratic regression, and terms such as democratic backsliding and democratic erosion have been coined and widely debated, often with contrasting interpretations and definitions. Democratic backsliding has been used to describe the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, norms, and practices within countries that were previously considered democratic. It manifests through the manipulation of electoral processes, erosion of checks and balances, suppression of civil liberties, and the weakening of the rule of law (Bellamy & Kröger, 2021; Cianetti et al., 2018; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Vachudova, 2020).

While the term “backsliding” is widely used, it implies a reversal to a previous state or historical precedent. However, as Kneuer (2023) argues, the recent examples of states affected by an illiberal turn do not “slide back” into their previous systems but rather into a different type of rule (Kneuer, 2023). For this reason, the concept of democratic “erosion” is used in this dissertation.

Kneuer (2021) suggests the metaphor of erosion, which implies that with the force of an agent, an existing structure is hollowed out and consequently deteriorates. The erosion agent actively weakens an existing democracy. What the notion of erosion can express in a more applicable way than backsliding is the driving factor for the process (an erosion agent), the object of the erosion (democracy), and the direction and nature of the process (gradual hollowing out). This understanding of democratic erosion underlines the critical role of agency and opportunity, as the erosion agents need to get access to power, have a sufficient scope of authority, and to remain in power. Kneuer argues that this approach involves two balancing acts. First, the eroding agents try to maintain the appearance of legitimacy, meaning they need the population's support domestically and depend on re-election. Secondly, they need a method for changing the democratic rules without domestic political resistance becoming too great and thus disrupting the plan for democratic erosion. To achieve this dual goal of democratic deconstruction without loss of domestic political support, erosion agents resort primarily to three mechanisms: a sequenced approach starting with an electoral victory leading to a reconfiguration of checks and balances

of power as well as limiting of political freedoms and civil rights; legalism - changes enacted in a constitutional manner; and a legitimizing narrative that ties the transformation to an alternative model with an appealing ideology that is able to mobilize at least a large part of the population. The outcomes of democratic erosion can be differentiated: democratic erosion can stop before a regime becomes autocratic, or it passes the line. Once the latter happens, democratic erosion becomes a process of autocratic consolidation (Kneuer, 2021).

In Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, the processes of erosion have been initiated by legally elected leaders. Those leaders – Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and ANO in the Czech Republic, sought electoral victory and popular legitimation to pursue their strategy of transforming democracy according to their envisaged alternative model of rule.

3.1 The Rebranding of Fidesz and the Illiberal Turn in Hungary

In Hungary, during the late 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, Hungary experienced alternating governments formed by coalitions of two major political camps, the right-wing parties (1998-2002) and left-liberal parties (2002-2010). Those two camps dominated the political arena, often at the expense of smaller parties. The main ideological divisions in society tended to align with the broader ideological positions represented by these two poles (Lindner, Novokmet, Piketty, & Zawisza, 2020).

The 2008 financial crisis marked the breaking point for the established political system. The qualified majority consensus obstructed reforms over the past two decades, and a range of informal practices stemming from tax evasion to political party financing obstructed the building of formal democratic institutions. Together with the failure to achieve meaningful economic reforms, the country turned out to be defenseless against the global economic crisis. It reached Hungary when the government was rapidly losing its political credibility domestically. The ruling MSZP government was plagued by allegations of corruption and political scandals (including a leaked speech given by socialist prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, who admitted to having “lied in the morning, at noon and at night” about the actual state of the Hungarian economy to win the elections) which eroded public trust in the ruling party and contributed to the perception of the establishment being out of touch with the needs of the people (Bozóki, 2015). The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis resulted in hundreds of thousands of people falling into poverty. Radical movements (such as far-right Jobbik) started appearing with promises of a ‘strong state’ and slogans such as ‘Hungary belongs to Hungarians’, picking up on the frustrations regarding the privatization processes favoring foreign capital, exclusion from the labor market for extended periods, social marginalization and the lack of solutions offered by the left. The perceived need for a definitive majority and strong political leadership increased, and it was recognized by Fidesz’s leader, Viktor Orbán. Fidesz’s electoral campaign addressed most of the current issues,

resonating with voters with promises of fixing the mistakes of the old elites and completing the work of the “failed” post-communist transition (Nadkarni, 2020).

It is important to note that Fidesz initially started as a center-left and liberal activist movement opposing the communist government. The party was strongly anti-clerical and committed to secular policies. In the mid-90s, it adopted liberal conservatism, realizing there was no efficient political force on the right despite a considerable right-wing electoral potential (Berglund, Ekman, Deegan-Krause, & Knutsen, 2013). Aspiring to fill in this gap, Orbán’s group proposed a new image for Fidesz, underlining its opposition to communism and the importance of national symbols for the creation of Hungarian national identity. It posited itself as the only political representative of a unified right and revived nationalist traditions of the 19th and 20th century Hungary. To strengthen its role in unifying right-wing voters, the party began a vigorous campaign against the left and liberals by associating them with the structures of communism (Babarczy et al., 2017).

The April 2010 general elections marked a victory of Fidesz with 53% of the popular vote, and due to the disproportionate election law, the party ended up with 68% of the seats in parliament. With the constitutional amendment rule, this two-thirds supermajority was big enough to start altering the institutional order (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2015). The new policies were based on the pillars of a central arena of power, a rhetoric of national unification, a change of elite, the practice of power politics, and the belief in revolutionary circumstances (interpretation of Orbán’s electoral victory as ‘revolutionary’ and thus justifying exceptional methods of rebuilding the entire public legal system). The identity politics, which revolved around the dichotomy of “us” versus “them,” were replaced by the program of “unifying the nation,” which necessitated a “central field of power.” Fidesz’s new system was to be perceived as a renewal and re-founding of the thousand-year-old Hungarian nationhood in the third millennium, linked to the vision of Hungary’s new status in Europe. Orbán promised Hungarians an expansive, strong, proud, and globally successful Hungary, seen as compensation for the severe wrongs the nation had endured (Bajomi et al., 2020).

In its first year in office, the Fidesz government amended the old constitution twelve times, changing more than fifty separate provisions along the way. The new Fidesz constitution was drafted in secret, presented to the Parliament with only one month for debate, passed by the votes of only the Fidesz parliamentary bloc, and signed by the Fidesz-appointed President. Neither the opposition parties, civil society organizations, nor the public had any influence on the constitutional process. A substantial portion of these alterations aimed at diminishing the efficacy of institutions that might have functioned as regulatory counterweights to governmental actions (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2015). The Fidesz government named all 11 judges appointed to the Constitutional Court between 2010 and 2014, and in 2016, a small opposition party was included in the nomination process for four other judges. Rulings in recent years on politically sensitive cases have favored government interests, and government

officials and media berate judgments that are detrimental to Fidesz's interests. In December 2019, an omnibus bill revived the administrative court circuit, limited judicial interpretation, and allowed Constitutional Court members to join the Supreme Court without nomination. In October 2020, Zsolt András Varga, a Constitutional Court judge favoring the government, became Supreme Court president. In this way, administrative authorities gained the ability to challenge rulings directly at the Constitutional Court. Political appointments at the Curia and an amendment requiring a two-thirds majority to remove the chief prosecutor weakened judicial independence (Freedom House, 2022b).

Fidesz has undermined the freedom of the media through legislation that has politicized its regulation. Regional and local media have been increasingly dominated by pro-government outlets, which are frequently used to smear political opponents and highlight false accusations. Government advertising and sponsorships favor pro-government outlets, leaving independent and critical outlets in a financially precarious position. The Fidesz governing coalition and their allies have worked to close or acquire critical media outlets. The 2016 closure of Hungary's most prominent independent daily, *Népszabadság*, represented a severe blow to media diversity. In late 2018, around 470 pro-government media outlets were merged under the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA). The government declared the merger to be of "national strategic importance" to exempt it from competition laws and won the court case that challenged the move. In 2020, Index, the country's largest independent news outlet, was also taken over by pro-government forces. The Media Council also revoked the broadcasting license of Klubrádió, the country's largest independent radio station, forcing it off the air in February 2021. In July 2021, an investigation by a team of international journalists revealed that independent journalists, businessmen, lawyers, and politicians were surveilled by the Hungarian authorities using the Israeli-made spyware Pegasus (Freedom House, 2022b).

All these changes have been disguised as progressive and justified by an attempt at achieving a politically homogenized culture of the national community. For Orbán, this is defined mainly on the basis of national identity – striving to establish a unitary system of values identified with the national interests. The nation, understood as an extended family, should serve as a bastion against the forces of globalization, liberalism, and the legacy of the communist system. Cultural pluralism is seen as a source of unnecessary cost and potential criticism, and using this rhetoric, the political independence of institutions was dismantled with the replacement of the administrative elite by Orbán's loyalists. Orbán skillfully attacked the banks (most of them being in foreign hands), the multinational corporations, the foreign media, and EU officials on the grounds of economic nationalism and sovereign democracy to earn votes. In the meantime, he introduced a flat tax, restricted the rights of employees, the unemployed, and the homeless; divided trade unions; nationalized local schools; and eliminated the autonomy of the universities. Corruption became the leading principle of the state, with laws protecting it under the altered Constitutional Court (Bozóki, 2015). As a result of both its own efforts and the fragmentation

(and, in some cases, disintegration) of its political opposition, Fidesz was reelected in 2014, 2018, and 2022 in coalition with KDNP. Fidesz has consequently centralized its power, and, among other initiatives, it has brought more and more institutions under control to curtail independent criticism and opposition (Nadkarni, 2020). Election observer missions noted the polls were severely marred by misuse of government resources, an unlevel playing field for opposition parties, and extensive electoral reforms that favored the ruling party.

The 2010 Fidesz victory election resulted in the implementation of electoral reforms that favored the ruling party (such as the redrawing of constituency boundaries and extending the franchise to non-resident Hungarians among whom support for Fidesz is disproportionately high) and used their two-thirds parliamentary majority to make unilateral constitutional changes. In November 2021, the Fidesz government amended the electoral law on registering permanent addresses, enabling individuals to create fictional permanent addresses, which paved the way for voter tourism during the 2022 general elections (Makszimov, 2021). The opposition remained fragmented, and opposition parties increasingly contended with obstacles and restrictions that detract from their ability to gain power through elections. These include unequal access to media, smear campaigns, politicized audits, and a campaign environment skewed by the ruling coalition's mobilization of state resources. The governing coalition can effectively draft and implement laws and policies without undue interference (Végh, 2022). In the campaign before the 2022 elections, the governing coalition misused its position to campaign via state channels, blurring the line between party advertising and government information campaigns. Due to the lack of restrictions on third-party campaigning and the exemption of social media advertising from campaign finance rules, progovernment organizations like Civil Unity Forum–Civil Union Public Benefit Foundation and Megafon could promote the government's messages without financial constraints (Freedom House, 2022b).

The three mechanisms of democratic erosion suggested by Kneuer (a sequenced approach; legalism; and a legitimizing narrative) have been successfully implemented. The illiberal changes led to Hungary turning into an electoral autocracy (V-Dem, 2023). Democratic erosion passed the line, and the process now is one of autocratic consolidation.

3.2 Deepening Polarization and the Success of Law and Justice in Poland

Austerity under the 2001-2005 left-wing government led to the collapse of the left in the 2005 election and to the emergence of two major parties on the right, namely Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska - PO) and Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość - PiS), which have dominated electoral competition in Poland since (Lindner et al., 2020).

PiS, founded by twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, who represented the conservative strand of Solidarity, emerged as a right-wing party emphasizing traditional family values, Catholicism, and social justice. PO was established in 2001 by economists and liberal politicians, including Donald Tusk. It positioned itself as a center-right party, advocating for market-oriented economic reforms and pro-European integration. It embraced a pro-European and pro-business stance, promoting economic liberalization, free-market policies, and social liberalism with the aim to modernize Poland's economy, strengthen democratic institutions, and enhance Poland's integration into the European Union. Law and Justice appealed to conservative and rural voters, with significant support from the Catholic Church, and PO addressed urban, liberal, and pro-European segments of society (Jasiecki, 2019).

The growing popularity of both parties reflected a widespread disillusionment with the established political parties that had governed Poland since the transition to democracy. PiS appealed to the target voters by addressing those who felt left behind by the rapid social and economic changes occurring in Poland, promising to root out corruption, fight for the interests of ordinary citizens, and address social inequalities. PO aimed at presenting itself as a modern and pro-European alternative to PiS, advocating for economic liberalism yet with party lines presenting a conservative stance in ideological matters (Newerle-Wolska & Wolski, 2020).

2005 marked the victory of Law and Justice, which formed a government in coalition with the populist Self-Defense Party (Samoobrona) and the nationalist League of Polish Families (LPR). PO, which came second in the elections, formed an opposition coalition with the Polish People's Party (PSL). During its period of rule in 2005-2007, PiS implemented a few policy solutions related to the idea of the renewal of the state, such as anti-corruption policies and institutions. It also underlined traditional Polish values, Catholicism, and a strong sense of national identity supported by an emphasis on historical memory against the globalizing world and the perceived Europeanization of the state. The coalition with Samoobrona and LPR led the party away from conservatism towards national populism, and Jarosław Kaczyński's decision to ally PiS with the Catholic cleric Tadeusz Rydzyk (founder of an influential Catholic media empire including the ultra-Catholic radio station Radio Maryja) gave a reason for liberals in the media and politics to mobilize against the party. This mobilization led to the electoral victory of PO in 2007. PO ruled for the next eight years in a coalition with PSL, giving PiS time to elaborate fresh policy programs and build a solid populist rhetoric (Dąbrowska, 2019). The political debate further polarized over the years, gaining a nickname of the "Polish-Polish war" – with the left-liberal camp perceiving PiS as representing right-wing populism and Catholic fundamentalism with authoritarian tendencies, and the conservative camp criticizing PO's market-oriented approach and closer integration with Western institutions, perceived as contributing to the loss of state sovereignty (Pawłowski, 2016).

PiS's electoral campaign focused on the critique of the ruling elites, with special attention put on divisive issues. The radicalization of the party rhetoric and a more substantial shift towards conservatism

followed the 2010 airplane catastrophe, which resulted in the tragic death of the Polish president Lech Kaczyński and ninety-five prominent Poles in Smolensk. The delegation was on the way to pay homage to Polish martyrs murdered by the Soviets in Katyn in 1940. The shock and emotional trauma of the Smolensk catastrophe brought to the fore Polish historical martyrology and was exploited by Jarosław Kaczyński to build strong support for PiS. It was implied that the crash was orchestrated by PO and Prime Minister Donal Tusk personally, in cooperation with the Russians, to eliminate the main political competition - President Lech Kaczyński (Newerle-Wolska & Wolski, 2020).

The framing of PO as the enemy of the Polish state continued. The party had been accused of being the cause of the main economic and political problems in Poland. At the same time, PiS started expressing more and more Eurosceptic stances, with narratives suggesting the European Union's liberalism as the cause of a cultural and social crisis with its 'gender' ideology (a concept coined by conservative thinkers to refer to sexual minorities fighting for their rights) and pro-refugee politics (Nimu & Volintiru, 2017). A new vision of the social order was presented, with the support of grand narratives on which the party could structure its approach to policy. PiS's proposals for institutional transformation moved toward changing the entire political system of the country (Jasiecki, 2019).

The changes began when PiS's candidate, Andrzej Duda, unexpectedly won the presidential elections with 51.6% in May 2015 against the incumbent President Bronisław Komorowski. In October 2015, PiS won the parliamentary election with 37.6% and was able to form a one-party government (which happened for the first time since 1989, given that the electoral law and somewhat fluid party system favors multi-party governments) but missed the constitutional majority. Shortly after the government was formed in coalition with a smaller conservative party, United Poland (Solidarna Polska), a series of political measures were hastily pushed through the parliament, including the controversial media and counterterrorism laws. Promises of new welfare benefits and support for the economically disadvantaged are said to have contributed to the electoral success of PiS in the 2015 and 2020 elections. Welfare benefits such as the introduction of the Family 500+ program that started in 2016, offering monthly financial support to families with children, as well as the restoration of early retirement age (back to 60 years for women and 65 for men) increased PiS's support among the general population. The minimum wage and minimum pensions have been raised, free medication for people over 75 and a program for low-cost social housing were introduced. The PiS-led government confirmed the thesis that right-wing parties in the CEE engage in greater social spending than left-wing and liberal parties (Dąbrowska, 2019). At the same time, the party has been accused of the misuse of public funds. It inserted loyalists into the boards of state-owned companies, distributing public assets to a network of allied actors (Jasiecki, 2019).

New appointments at the Constitutional Court started with a replacement of five Constitutional Court judges, leading to a paralysis of the institution. A new law from December 2015 changed the set-

up of the Constitutional Court and its decision-making rules, forcing it, among other things, to make decisions exclusively by a two-thirds majority. In 2017, three significant judicial reforms were adopted. The first gave the justice minister the power to appoint and dismiss presidents and deputy presidents of courts. The second, which came into force in 2018, mandated that fifteen of the twenty-five members of the National Judicial Register, which is responsible for nominating judges, be appointed by the parliament instead of elected by the judiciary. In July 2018, new, lower retirement ages for the Supreme Court came into force, effectively meaning that twenty-seven out of seventy-three judges had to step down unless they were given the president's approval to remain. These judges were reinstated later that year after an infringement procedure from the European Commission and an interim ruling of the European Court of Justice (ECJ), which later confirmed that the measures had breached European law. The Supreme Court law also created powerful new chambers—the Chamber of Extraordinary Control and Public Affairs (responsible for declaring the validity of elections) and the Disciplinary Chamber. (Freedom House, 2022c).

A series of laws were passed allowing the government to appoint heads of the public, TV, and radio. Close ties with the Church and fundamentalist religious organizations resulted in the introduction of harsh anti-abortion laws, opposition to in vitro fertilization, prenatal testing, and campaigns demonizing LGBTQ+ minorities. Although the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and forbids censorship, libel laws have been used to harass journalists. Since 2015, politicians and government-affiliated entities have filed nearly two hundred lawsuits against independent media outlets and journalists. Public media and their governing bodies have been purged of independent or dissenting voices since PiS came to power in 2015. TVP, the state broadcaster, promotes government messages and often seeks to discredit the opposition in flagrant breach of statutory obligations to present news in a “reliable and pluralistic manner.” Since 2015, the government has regularly used state-run companies to exert control over local media. In December 2020, oil giant PKN Orlen bought the previously German-owned Polska Press, a media organization that publishes 20 regional daily newspapers, 120 regional weekly newspapers, and 500 online portals. While the company has pledged to safeguard editorial independence, more than a dozen editors-in-chief had quit or been dismissed by July 2021. Independent media have been framed as liberal propaganda tools designed to prevent critique of the post-1989 system, as well as sponsored by the West to spread values hostile to the traditional Polish ideals (Freedom House, 2022c).

Other issues include the fairness of elections, which were considered free but not fair due to the state broadcaster's bias and the use of public funds as election financing for the governing majority's candidates. In December 2021, a research team at the University of Toronto reported that a mobile phone belonging to a Civic Platform senator and general elections campaign manager, Krzysztof Brejza, had been hacked with Pegasus spyware in the period leading up to the 2019 parliamentary elections. Text

messages stolen from his phone were used in negative reports about him on PiS-controlled public TV news during the campaign. Phones of an opposition-linked lawyer and a prosecutor critical of the government's judicial reforms were also hacked, raising concerns over the fairness of elections won by PiS (Kirchgaessner, 2022).

As of September 2023, the democracy scores calculated in consideration of the recent developments suggest that autocratization stalled before democracy broke down in Poland (V-Dem, 2023). The mechanisms of democratic erosion have been implemented, but a level of resistance is still possible. The results of the upcoming parliamentary elections set for the 15th of October 2023 will decide the future direction of democracy in Poland. The third term governed by PiS would probably mean a continuation of a drift away from democratic standards (Pawlak, 2023).

3.3 Anti-politics in the Czech Republic and the rise of ANO

Since 1989, the Czech political landscape has been fragmented with numerous parties, leading to unstable coalitions and frequent changes in government. The electoral competition between 1998 and 2013 was characterized by a close race between the left and the right, with both of their vote shares close to 50%. The process of privatization and property restitution gave rise to corrupt practices and the formation of clientelist networks within the emerging dominant political parties, specifically ODS and ČSSD (Janík, 2010). The years between 2007 and 2012 witnessed a substantial drop in citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in the Czech Republic, as well as trust in the Chamber of Deputies. The period saw significant political instability in the country, with frequent changes in government leadership. Various political parties struggled to reach a consensus and establish coalitions that could provide stable governance. These challenges in coalition-building highlighted political divisions and made it challenging for governments to pursue coherent policies. The instability led to a perception of political ineffectiveness and inconsistency in governance. The tensions between the coalition parties led to the fall of the government in the spring of 2009 (Balík & Hloušek, 2016). On the right, new parties emerged, such as conservative Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09 (TOP 09) or Mayors and Independents (STAN), and, most importantly, ANO 2011. Furthermore, the support for the populist radical right (Freedom and Direct Democracy, SPD) has increased. A prominent newcomer at the opposite end of the political spectrum is the anti-establishment cosmopolitan-liberal Pirate Party, which came third in the 2017 elections (Lindner et al., 2020).

The widespread loss of trust in political institutions resulted in the programmatic focus of the new parties on a critique of the current political system – campaigning with a combination of a strong anti-establishment appeal, calls for more direct democracy, and anti-corruption slogans – addressing especially the political actors present in the Czech Republic for more than ten years (Havlík, 2015). The

most important was ANO 2011, led by Andrej Babiš, a billionaire of Slovak origin and the owner of the biggest agrochemical company in the country. A very intense election campaign before the 2013 election resulted in 18.65% of the vote and 47 out of 200 seats for ANO, becoming part of the new government alongside ČSSD and KDU-ČSL (Guasti, 2020).

The party rhetoric revolved around the contrast constructed between practices typical for running companies (employment of thousands of people, paying millions in taxes) – symbolized by the successful businessman Babiš - and a supposedly dysfunctional and corruption-ridden state, supported by slogans such as ‘I will run the state like a business’ or ‘We are not like the politicians – we work!’ (Havlík, 2015). ANO’s success in 2017 marked a breakthrough in Czech politics. Until then, either the Czech Social Democratic Party or the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) led the governments of the Czech Republic. In October 2017, ANO 2011 won the elections with three times more votes than its closest rival, ODS. In December 2017, Czech President Miloš Zeman appointed Andrej Babiš as the new prime minister (Vachudova, 2020).

In less than five years, Babiš has successfully cast himself as the defender of “ordinary people,” despite being the second most affluent person in the country - rose from a businessman to the minister of finance, then to the prime minister, and campaigned to become the country’s president in 2022, losing against Petr Pavel in January 2023 (Tait, 2023). Babiš’s company, Agrofert, controlled large parts of the Czech economy and benefited tremendously from EU subsidies. Agrofert had grown powerful by engaging in criminal business practices, exploiting political connections, and leveraging the services of former high-level police investigators and prominent communist-era secret service agents. In turn, Babiš amassed power as an oligarch that gave him the resources to purchase vast media holdings, hire marketing experts, and launch the ANO party that broke through in the 2013 elections as a highly controlled vehicle for his political ambitions (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018). Babiš and Zeman contributed to a hostile climate for journalists in recent years despite Czechia’s relatively free media environment. Media outlets critical of the government were sometimes denied accreditation, and journalists from these outlets were frequently prevented from attending government press conferences. Legislation protects private ownership of media outlets, but concerns remain about the extent to which the media is controlled by wealthy business figures and its potential impact on journalists’ ability to investigate commercial interests. Although Babiš placed his significant media holdings in a trust while in office, the trust was partly controlled by his close associates. Critics have accused both of his newspapers of biased coverage, claiming they had been used to advance Babiš’s political interests (Sybera, 2022).

Contrary to Fidesz and PiS, ANO had less success reforming official institutions in the Czech Republic. It had, however, benefited from unconstitutional favors from President Miloš Zeman. In order to silence dissent and discourage whistleblowers, it continued to effectively purge the state

administration and foster the culture of self-censorship. Additionally, it worked with far-right parties to install a new ombudsman who took strongly majoritarian positions, undermining the independence of the judiciary in the process (Willoughby, 2020). The appointment of Justice Minister Marie Benešová in 2019 raised concerns about judicial independence, as she openly supported Babiš and downplayed his involvement in fraud scandals. Former attorney general Pavel Zeman's resignation in 2021, alleging political pressure from Benešová, raised further concerns. However, despite corruption and political pressures, the public prosecutor's office has become more independent in recent years, and the rule of law generally prevailed in civil and criminal matters (Freedom House, 2022a). The Constitutional Court remained, unlike its Hungarian and Polish counterparts, relatively free of political capture. The appointment system requires the cooperation of the Czech President and the politically diverse Senate, which largely forestalls the establishment of a politically homogenous Court, fully cooperative with the Government and the lower chamber (Smekal, Benák, & Vyhnánek, 2022).

While considered free and fair by international observers, both the 2021 parliamentary elections and the presidential elections were negatively impacted by disinformation, and an official report warning of this development was obstructed by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (Sybera, 2022). President Zeman openly endorsed PM Babiš and his ANO 2011 party during the electoral campaign, promising in June to give a governing mandate to the largest political party—poised to be Babiš's ANO—rather than to the largest coalition (Babiš's opponents) after the elections. This announcement represented a break with Czechia's democratic tradition and undermined voters' faith in the political system in light of the Constitutional Court ruling and subsequent changes to the electoral law (Sybera, 2022). Despite the illiberal steps undertaken by Babiš, the 2021 parliamentary election did not grant ANO a majority government. The two leading political subjects - SPOLU – (the coalition of ODS, KDU-CSL, TOP9) and ANO - received a similar number of votes (27%). SPOLU and PirStan (Pirate Party and STAN party coalition) accounted for a majority in the Chamber of Deputies and agreed to form a coalition government. Traditional left-wing parties ČSSD and the communist KSČM failed to reach the five percent threshold to win seats in the Chamber of Deputies for the first time since 1993. Petr Fiala (ODS) took office as Prime Minister, and despite sitting in the European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament together with Poland's PiS, he promised a shift towards the West, with a strong interest in strengthening the relations with the EU (Cienski & Bayer, 2022).

In late 2022, Andrej Babiš campaigned for the presidency yet lost against ex-military General Petr Pavel. Andrej Babiš led an abrasive campaign marred by false accusations – such as Pavel being a KGB-trained communist spy – with no evidence for the claims. Pavel's victory has been named “a triumph of reason above populism” (Kokot, 2023). Despite the aggressive campaigns and Babiš's control over Czech media, the electoral process remained the most democratic out of the three countries, and the recent developments bode well for the democratic direction of Czechia.

Hanley (2014) argued that Czech democracy exhibited functional characteristics such as that programmatic and ideological divisions have not entirely disappeared; that power is fragmented and dispersed; institutions are sometimes resistant to politicians; that judges and prosecutors act autonomously; society can mobilize against political elites; that voters are tempted by anti-politics but not by ideological radicalism; that the electorate is rational and seeks democratic reform (Hanley, 2014). The 2023 Democracy Report argued the 2021 elections brought the Czech Republic back towards a democratic direction (V-Dem, 2023). Still, it should be noted that Babiš received 42% of the votes in the second round of the elections, meaning that his influence and support are still considerable and that the Czech voters are not fully resilient to populist appeals.

4. What Kind of Populism?

The comparative analysis of the political situations of each country proved that different kinds of populism developed, leading to various levels of state capture by the elected actors. Thus, this chapter considers the historical, cultural, and political factors that serve as an explanation for the political developments discussed in the previous chapter. Differences between the established political systems are explained, followed by cultural differences and their effect on the country-specific national identities, as well as the role of religion and the level of political influence of the church in each country. The chapter ends with a discussion of the mobilizing power of the two kinds of populism – national populism in Hungary and Poland and technocratic populism in the Czech Republic.

4.1 Political Differences

According to Kneuer, a critical logic of action deployed by the erosion agent is that they proceed in sequences when dismantling the democratic structures, processes, and principles. An evolutionary sequencing pattern starts with electoral victory (access to power), reconfiguring the balance of power and neutralizing control instances, securing persistence in power, and limiting political freedoms and civil rights. Erosion agents also strive to give a legal appearance to their transformation. Great importance is attached to coming into power legally, but also to remaining in power for as long as possible through more or less legal elections, while at the same time safeguarding this with more or less legal laws that help to cement their claim to power. This includes amendment of electoral laws, media laws, and changes in the judiciary, eventually reconfiguring the balance of power and the institutional setting and weakening liberal democracy and accountability. Frequently, it becomes apparent only after some time that an incumbent is working to transform a democratic nation, as this process typically unfolds gradually and sequentially (Kneuer, 2023). This logic can be observed in the actions of PiS, Fidesz, and ANO. Yet only PiS and Fidesz succeeded in reconfiguring the balances of power and neutralizing instances of control through legal alterations.

As demonstrated, the 20 years of democratic consolidation in the Czech Republic resulted in a mix of corruption, socioeconomic frustration, and anti-political voting, but democracy has not suffered from dangerous concentrations of power, or does it have strong political actors with illiberal political visions, the like of Viktor Orbán or Jarosław Kaczyński. No political party achieved dominance on the political scene comparable to Fidesz or Law and Justice (Hanley, 2014). This is due to a combination of historical, cultural, and political factors.

First, the Czech electoral system is designed to promote political diversity, proportional representation, and coalition politics. These features contribute to a political landscape where no single party can easily achieve power concentration. Instead, parties must engage in coalition-building and negotiate to form stable governments, which can lead to a more balanced and inclusive approach to

governance. This system aligns with democratic values and helps prevent the emergence of overly dominant political forces. The Czech Republic employs a proportional representation (PR) system for both parliamentary and local elections. In PR systems, the distribution of parliamentary seats closely mirrors the popular vote distribution. This means that parties are allocated seats in proportion to the percentage of votes they receive. In effect, the fragmented political system makes it hard for any ruling government or president to gain a strong enough position to mount a sustained attack on democratic institutions, such as the Court. Smekal, Benák, and Vyhnánek (2022) argue that the Czech Republic's resilient constitutional courts are products of an institutional framework that prevents court-packing by loyal allies of populist leaders and of courts' activities that increase their reputation with the public, thus making political attacks against them overly costly. The Czech Constitutional Court has exercised an approach of selective judicial activism that focused on keeping political competition fair while avoiding involvement in controversial socially transformative judicial decision-making that would outrage large parts of the population. Moreover, by acting as a guardian of fair political competition, the Court contributed to the further fragmentation of the political landscape, which in turn prevented the accumulation of political power. Hence, the Court shielded itself from political attacks (Smekal et al., 2022).

Hungary and Poland use mixed electoral systems that combine first-past-the-post and proportional representation elements. This leads to a more complex system with single-member districts and party-list components. In the initial years of their post-communist transitions, Hungary and Poland may have emphasized achieving stable and majority governments. Mixed electoral systems with a majoritarian component were seen as a way to facilitate this, but they led to the formation of a party system that long-term disrupted the democratic process from achieving maturity and allowed concentration of power and the following attacks on liberal democracy come to fruition (Bozóki, 2015; Dajczak et al., 2021).

These developments of the political systems can be seen as the effect of differing developments of the political cultures of each country. Poland and Hungary have histories of more centralized and authoritarian rule, with long periods of foreign occupation. In contrast, before the First World War, the Czech lands, still a component of the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire, had one of the strongest traditions of law in Eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia, until its partition and occupation by Germany in the aftermath of the Munich Agreement, was also the only country in Eastern Europe to experience uninterrupted democracy from its independence in 1918 until 1938. Finally, the Czechs also had the most developed industry and the most fully literate population in Eastern Europe (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Higher levels of industrialization meant relatively higher economic development in Poland and Hungary and a stronger middle class with a more stable economic foundation. In combination with the lack of foreign debt during the period of democratic transition, these factors contributed to more political stability.

Another element distinguished by Kneuer is the erosion agent's use of discursive strategies to legitimize their project of transformation, which can take up the form of a legitimizing narrative. PiS and Fidesz blended conservative identity politics with economic redistributive policies, forming a broader "social-nationalist" agenda. Whereas the rise of populist parties can be partly attributed to increased demand for protection against economic insecurity and cultural changes, the main point of departure for ANO was a fight against corruption and existing political parties hindering the Czech political and economic system from prosperity (Hájek, 2017).

In both Poland and Hungary, the desire to distance themselves from their communist past posed a challenge for left-wing parties to prioritize a distributional program. As a result, in the first decades post-transition, there was no significant redistributive-economic political divide between the Left and Right, allowing populists to fill this void later. Starting in 2005, PiS in Poland embraced the concept of 'class' and successfully appealed to lower-income and lower-education voters who had not benefited from the post-communist transition. In contrast, the Czech Republic had a pre-existing and prominent division, resulting in the populist entry having a less pronounced redistributive dimension. The decline in support for the left in the Czech Republic did not lead to the rise of an ideological agenda similar to Poland and Hungary. Instead, the emergence of ANO can be attributed to its focus on 'centrist populism.' ANO rejected establishment politicians as a corrupt elite, positioning itself close to the center of the electorate in terms of attitudes on redistribution and the EU.

Initially calling his movement a "Civic Forum for the future," Babiš never addressed the need to restore popular sovereignty and the role of "the people," making the party's line significantly different from the politics of Orbán and Kaczyński. PiS and Fidesz, in the last decade, have been increasingly focused on criticizing elites, both in the historical dimension but also economic and social one. The policies implemented by both parties have been justified by fighting the elites and helping to complete the post-communist transition. Wojtas (2011) highlights how, in post-communist countries, democracy is often equated with bodies dealing with politics, and in these cases, there is a clear personalization of its perception. As a result, populists and their supporters reject the elites and the system (institutions and mechanisms) identified with them, which are seen as responsible for growing social inequalities (Wojtas, 2011). Moreover, the identification connects the transformation with the decisions of political elites who aimed to immediately introduce "standard" solutions of democratic capitalism, which were supposed to mean a transition to the expected standards of affluent capitalist societies. Criticism of the elites resonates with the negative attitudes of populists towards liberal democracy. Features of this process include social discouragement and growing tendencies to depart from liberalism, which is understood as an ideology of power, a set of values, a way of governance, and a cultural ethos (Zielonka & Bednarek, 2018).

4.2 Cultural Differences and the Formative Elements of National Identity

The common denominator between Fidesz's and PiS's politics has been the ideological war against the LGBTQ community and refugees, and a significant reduction of politics to a politics of fear with its portrayals of the alleged threats to the country and their Christian values (Bolt, 2018). As the above analysis has shown, Fidesz and PiS evolved over time in response to changing political dynamics and public sentiments. In order to cater to the right-wing electorate, both absorbed elements of social conservatism through the opposition to liberalization in worldview and cultural issues such as granting rights to minorities and promoting multiculturalism, as these are considered a threat to national culture, religious values, and the traditional model of family (Eatwell et al., 2020).

While anti-immigrant discourse has been present in Czech politics since 2015, and the new parliamentary majority is more conservative than liberal, the Czech public tends to hold less conservative social views and participate in fewer religious activities than its neighbors. For example, Czechs have among the highest levels of support for legal abortion (84%) and same-sex marriage (65%) in the region. Similarly, they are the most likely to say they never attend religious services (55%) or pray (68%) (Pew Research Center, 2017). For this reason, since ANO is an example of a vote-seeking party without strict ideological bonds, to arrive at the highest number of potential voters, it has remained ideologically in the center - closer to social democrats rather than to right-wing parties (Hájek, 2017).

The political culture in Czechia has been generally more secular, liberal, and Western-oriented, while conservative and nationalist sentiments, along with a significant role of the church and religion as part of national identity formation, have a long history in Poland and Hungary. Holy's fieldwork in Czechoslovakia in 1992 revealed an almost total renouncement of nationalism by the Czechs, with the general public claiming that nationalism was something that plagued others – Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, and the various nations of the former Soviet Union – but not the Czechs. The denial of Czech nationalism can be interpreted as part of the construction of a positive image of the Czech nation. Accordingly, to the geopolitical imagination of the East-West divide, the Czechs found their identity in their rational, educated, and civilized Westernness, separated from the chauvinist irrationality of Eastern Europe. The most respected and sustained national traditions in the Czech Republic have long been the tradition of culture, good education, common sense, and democracy (Holy, 1996). In this context, appeals to national pride present in the politics of Fidesz and PiS do not have as much potential in the Czech Republic. Data shows that patriotism is still low among the Czechs. While right-wing politicians manage to use arguments regarding Czech's sovereignty in the context of the European Union or the migration crisis, a different cultural background and the lack of strong connection with the church prevents populist politicians from amassing strong support with the use of identity politics (Chlup, 2020).

Hungary and Poland share some cultural similarities due to the experience of loss of sovereignty throughout history and the disappearance of the Polish and Hungarian states, as well as subjugation to

foreign forces and loss of territory in the 20th century. The deep sense of victimization resulting from territorial losses inflicted by external forces, including historically significant regions like Transylvania for Hungarians and Kresy for Poles, played a pivotal role in shaping national ideologies and mythologies (Kulska, 2023). Both countries' cultural and political leaders have long emphasized narratives suggesting being the victims of history and the perception of ill-treatment by the superpowers. Consequently, right-wing politicians tend to define other people in terms of friends and enemies, with a mixture of pride and shame towards the external world (Newerle-Wolska & Wolski, 2020).

In Poland, in the conservative circles, historical memory has long been intertwined with pain and suffering. Already in the 19th century, Polish romantic artists and thinkers fostered a homogenous idea of Polish national identity revolving around sacrifice and martyrdom. The romantic mythology was revived by conservative parties after 1989, and the politics of history promoted by right-wing parties such as Law and Justice calls for unconditional love for the country and does not allow the critical assessment of the historical events in Polish history, and Poles' role during the war (Mazierska, 2017).

The belief in the "greatest martyrdom of the Polish Nation," often underlined by PiS politicians, has become a political tool, and a successful one at that. 2019 opinion poll revealed that 74% of interviewed Poles believed that Polish people suffered the most out of all the nations of the world. The age group that supported the statement the most were people over 60, and a surprisingly big percentage of 18-29 – proving how successful historical education has been in ingraining national mythologies in young minds (Sitnicka, 2019).

In Hungary, the fear of obliteration has been a topic of debate among Hungarian conservatives. The intellectual elites of the 19th century debated the survival of the national community, especially after the defeat of the War of Independence between 1848-49 and the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, which led to the loss of two-thirds of Hungary's former territory, three-fifths of the total prewar population, and one-third of the Hungarian speaking population. These events have been preserved in collective memories, primarily in literature and the arts, emphasizing the threats posed by outsiders (Bluhm & Varga, 2019).

4.3 The Role of Religion and the Political Influence of the Church

Historically, the Church was a refuge for Polish national identity during periods of foreign rule and communism. Where Churches shielded the nations, patriotism became inseparable from religious loyalty. In the course of those struggles, national and religious identities melted together, forging a powerful form of religious nationalism (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). Due to its importance in social life, communist authorities agreed to negotiate with the Church in exchange for maintaining social order. The Catholic Church sustained a sphere of relative autonomy, which gave it organizational and ideological capacities to resist its and the Polish nation's full incorporation into totalitarian structures. This social pluralism of the Catholic Church generated a complex pattern of reciprocal power

recognition and even negotiation between the Catholic Church and the state, not found in any other Communist regime (Linz & Stepan, 1996). In 1989, the Polish church had a strong social and spiritual power but no state privileges, and it treated democratization as an opportunity to gain additional clerical authority (Meyer Resende, 2014).

The support of the Church was essential during the democratic transition. With the rise of the Solidarity movement, a dialogue emerged between liberals and the Catholic Church, resulting in a liberal-conservative consensus that dominates Poland to this day. While this alliance was perceived as crucial for Solidarity's struggle against authoritarianism, it weakened the left wing as it shifted away from traditionally anticlerical demands towards conservative Catholic values. Traditional anticlericalism characteristic of the left did not have many supporters since the last proponent of the implementation of an anticlerical program was Władysław Gomułka - the secretary general of the Communist party until 1970. Nevertheless, the renunciation of secularism and anticlericalism opened the way for a situation in which a quasi-monopoly on naming moral dilemmas (such as the issues of abortion and the 'defense of life') was obtained by Catholic thought (Leder, 2014). The liberal wing's preference for a secular state went against the church's postulates to gain clerical authority over issues of morality and public affairs and consequently contributed to the polarization of the political system in Poland. The church demanded special privileges using the argument of the Polish nation being a millennial community of Catholic Poles forged in war and under foreign occupation (Meyer Resende, 2014). Eventually, the Church gained legal and financial privileges in exchange for support on NATO and EU accession in the form of a treaty with the Vatican under Article 25 (concordat) of the constitution in 1993, securing its participation in public life and education. Church's opposition to abortion, the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, contraception, reproductive technology, and research on stem cells dominated the political debates of the 21st century (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). This complex relationship between the Catholic Church and the state has been a defining feature of Polish politics and the divisions within Polish society.

The involvement of parish priests at the local level has been crucial for the success of right-wing politicians in local elections in Poland. These priests have endorsed particular candidates in their communities by directly campaigning from their church pulpits, distributing pamphlets during services, or influencing the views of important figures in the local community. In many cases, this support has substituted for more conventional political campaigns, particularly in rural areas and small towns (Żuk & Żuk, 2019). Emblematic of Jarosław Kaczyński's and PiS's political program after the 2015 elections is the famous quote, "The hand raised against the Church is the hand raised against Poland!" (Kardas, 2015). The victory of PiS meant more political power granted to the church in exchange for borrowing the Catholic identity and legitimization of its illiberal and anti-democratic policies. Despite opposition from the liberal faction of the Church in Poland, the National Catholic faction radicalized its position and gained more political and legislative influence by cementing its relationship with the PiS government (Meyer Resende & Hennig, 2021). It is argued that the Church's involvement in the

democratic transition and its aftermath supported the survival of nationalist forces in Poland (Meyer Resende & Hennig, 2021).

Despite Hungary not having a strong connection with the Church, the last decade saw numerous speeches and writings by politicians and the Christian clergy, which identified the decreasing Hungarian Christian population as a number one concern (Kürti, 2020b). Seeing the benefit of collaborating with the structures of the Church, Viktor Orbán reacted to these narratives by combining Christianity in the conversations about nationality. Christian values became something used to distinguish the true Hungarians and their culture from the liberals and from the values imposed by the West, forming a legitimizing narrative. The party had used Christian narratives to rally support for its hardline immigration policies during the refugee crisis in 2015. Fidesz's electoral campaign involved Christian fundamentalist revivalism, as well as the revitalization of the Holy Crown theory (the Holy Crown is a royal symbol associating Hungarian sovereignty and nationhood to the first saint-king, Stephen, the legendary founder of the Hungarian state in 1000 CE). The monopolization of national symbols serves as an effort to create a sense of community and achieve sacralization of power. With such a conservative turn, a new cultural policy has been implemented to further Hungarian studies of prehistory, folk traditions, and national reawakening (Kürti, 2015). The 7th Amendment of the new constitution adopted by Fidesz in 2011 stated, "The protection of Hungary's self-identity and its Christian culture is the duty of all state organizations." The text of the preamble addresses the recognition of Christianity's "role in preserving nationhood" among the members of the Hungarian nation and honors the fact that the Holy Crown "embodies" the constitutional continuity of Hungary's statehood (Halmai, 2018).

Moreover, throughout Hungary's history, very few civil organizations were run by the Church. Currently, the ones which proved loyalty to Fidesz started enjoying more power within the state (Coakley, 2022). Viktor Orbán has managed to use religion and Catholicism opportunistically. Initially, Fidesz was a liberal party with a militantly anti-clerical view that started to become conservative in the mid-90s, eventually turning to an openly positive stance towards religion (Halmai, 2018). Catholicism became a reservoir of conservative values, which were to become the foundation for the creation of nation-oriented, anti-European, and antiliberal political stances. In the last two decades, Catholic rituals have proved to be useful in strengthening collectivity and reaffirming the sacred status of the nation in the collective memory (Kulska, 2023).

In Hungary, while the Catholic Church held numerical and political dominance over Protestants, it had limited historical involvement in safeguarding national identity. Consequently, Catholicism never became synonymous with Hungarian patriotism. During the communist era, the Roman Catholic Church did not function as a symbol of national sovereignty or offer protection to the opposition, as was the case in Poland (Halmai, 2018). Hungarian religious institutions, including the Catholic Church, suffered under the early years of communism. The political, societal, and economic power owed to the nature of

the legislature and considerable land ownership was stripped away. Religious education and Church-ran schools were shut down, taking away the social influence dimension. Huvos (2022) argues that the memory of this humiliation and loss of power explains the church's favorable stance towards Fidesz and the party's narratives in exchange for the government's support. Over ten years, nearly 250 million euros have been spent on supporting the Churches in various ways, including paying for church events (International Eucharistic Congress), paying reparations for the assets seized by the Communists, and funding religious education (Huvos, 2022). Due to this increase in political power in recent years, Hungary's religious institutions have avoided criticizing the government from a moral standpoint.

Following the example of Kaczyński, Orbán has established strong connections with the upper clergy in Hungary, as well as with rural churches, and this is crucial because much of the government's support has come from these communities. In the recent parliamentary election, only constituencies in the more liberal capital, Budapest, did not vote for Fidesz. Fidesz invested in arranging civic circles on the local community level. Those spaces attracted Hungarians by adhering to the central underlying values and an identity contrarian to the 'enemy' – communists, liberals, the EU, and later on, migrants and the LGBT+ community. In turn, the organizations initiated the registration of new NGOs, associations, and foundations, creating a network and a strong mass basis of potential Fidesz voters. After the 2010 elections, the government provided them with financial support, leading to a change in the allocation of seats to representatives of government bodies – consequently making dissident civil decisions and protests nearly impossible (Kövér, 2015).

Contrarily, the Czechs had always understood the state to be the defender of a nation's vital interests and a guarantee of its existence as a cultural entity, and thus, they had always striven for independent statehood. The secular nature of Czech national identity and the rejection of the Roman Catholic Church stems from this premise. Weak support for traditional church religion is partly a legacy of Czech nationalism of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and its interpretation of the country's religious history. Catholicism, which was the major religion at that time, was seen as an Austrian import that forcibly replaced the "true" religion of the Czech nation – Protestantism. The denunciation of the Hapsburg monarchy and German language and culture (though, paradoxically, the German-speaking urban intelligentsia played a significant role in the first wave of Czech nationalism) also included a rejection of the Catholic faith. In the second half of the 20th century, indifference towards church religion was further deepened by the anti-religious propaganda and persecution of the communist regime. However, the Czech population had somewhat ambiguous attitudes towards the Church even before the onset of communism, which explains why none of the other Central European post-communist countries displays similarly low support for traditional religion as the Czech Republic's population (Hamplová & Nešpor, 2009). A majority of the adult population (72%) claims no religious affiliation, and 25% identify as atheist, making it by far the most secular country in Europe – which explains the less conservative social views of the Czechs (Pew Research Center, 2017).

4.4 National Populism vs Technocratic Populism

While the whole range of national identity-relevant issues, such as sovereignty, culture, and external threats, has risen since the general election in 2013, the above-mentioned cultural differences can explain why the Czech Republic avoided the domination of reactionary nationalism. Due to the lack of symbolic attachment to religion, national identity in its extreme form in Czech politics is not stepping into the political mainstream with such significant electoral success as in Poland or Hungary (Vit, 2017). Poland is an example of a country in which religious and national loyalties blended into one coexisting and interdependent phenomenon. On the other hand, Hungary has observed a re-emergence of religious nationalism based on a surrogate of religion and is used as a basis for a newly constructed axiology. In both countries, the concept of “the chosen nation” was applied to carry out the mission of fulfilling the civilizational duty of salvation from Western liberal values. In both cases, a retrospective mentality, rather than a prospective one, is becoming the essential base of a national consciousness typical of more traditional, past, and history-oriented societies (Kulska, 2023).

Wojtas (2011) argues that in young democracies, populism interacts with the political environment in a way that it becomes an expression of the problems in accepting a democratic model that does not meet social expectations (Wojtas, 2011). Yilmaz (2012) states that populism is a type of response to the right-left typology crisis, a reaction to the blurring of the original differences between right-wing and left-wing parties occurring in democratic states since the end of the 20th century. Populism is presented as a reaction to the ideological unification of the political elites and their loss of touch with the needs of the general population. The greatest importance is assigned to the division between “the people” on one side and “elites,” “regime,” or “government” (in crisis) on the other (Yilmaz, 2012). Fidesz, PiS, and ANO all criticized the ruling elites and positioned themselves on the side of the ordinary people. However, compared to the conservative national populism of Orbán and Kaczyński, which underlines national unity, Christian-conservative values, and tradition, Babiš mainly focused on crafting an image of corrupt, power-seeking, and inept politicians who undermined the efforts of hardworking individuals. He presented himself as a successful businessman capable of “managing the state like a company.” However, Babiš's conflicts with expert institutions such as the Constitutional Court and the Czech National Bank undermined his own emphasis on technocratic rule, leading to a loss of trust among parts of the Czech population (Vachudova, 2020).

In Hungary and Poland, the weakness of liberal democracy has not only been the struggle to advance the general population’s well-being but also the negligence of identity politics that contributed to the post-communist nations' vulnerability to promises from the right wing (Leder, 2014). Orbán’s and Kaczyński’s populism addressed traditions and values with a deeper ideological basis, while Babiš resorted to technocratic populism – employing a strategic appeal to technocratic competence, anti-corruption rhetoric, and the ideology of expertise to connect with ordinary people. Babiš's technocratic approach, which focuses on pragmatic governance with a limited ideology, has been arguably less likely

to mobilize and polarize the public as much as Orbán's and Kaczyński's appeals to national greatness (Smekal et al., 2022).

5. Cultural politics

The previous chapters supported the claim that the specific characteristics of the Czech political system and society made the country resilient to an illiberal turn similar to Hungary and Poland. The comparison between Fidesz, PiS, and ANO revealed that while the populists in each country criticized the elites and the established liberal-democratic system, what differentiated Babiš's party was the lack of a strong ideological programmatic approach and the subsequent development of a new cultural policy. This chapter dissects the cultural politics of Fidesz and PiS as an integral component of the mechanism of democratic erosion, acting both as a legitimizing narrative and a means of limiting the freedom of expression. First, the history of party identification with conservative thought is described. Second, a description of the implementation of new cultural politics in the arts and culture sector follows. Third, mechanisms of the takeover of the arts and culture sector are presented and discussed for Fidesz and PiS separately. Lastly, similarities and differences between the cultural politics of both governments are underlined.

5.1 Underpinnings of Identification with Conservatism

The democratic transition of 1989 was marked by the introduction of several core values and principles that underpinned the shift from an authoritarian communist regime to a democracy. In the Czech Republic, those values reflected universalist humanistic values propagated by Vaclav Havel, which were also historically embedded in the Czech society and aligned with its respect for democratic tradition. The first two decades post-1989 were characterized by the domination of liberal democratic and pro-Western spirit. In both Hungary and Poland, however, the liberal culture combining individualism with the values of tolerance, openness, equality, and respect for the rule of law has not resonated with all sub-cultures of those societies.

In Poland, it has been supported by a large segment of the post-1989 elite, but more conservatively inclined members of the intellectual class have constantly challenged many of its elements. According to conservative thinkers, the democratic-liberal order was not based on values and tradition; instead, selected elements of tradition were used instrumentally to legitimize the status quo (Dąbrowska, 2019). The transition culture was criticized for being based on an alliance of the liberals and ex-communists, and therefore only protecting the political and economic interests of this alliance, not corresponding to the “natural” cultural leanings of many Poles – meaning Catholic Nationalism (Kulska, 2023). As Leder (2014) and Meyer Resende (2015) argued, the church's political strategies in the 90s had substantial implications for the shape of party competition as well as the ideological divisions of Polish society.

In Hungary, different political and cultural groups had varying perspectives on the country's historical legacy, particularly concerning its role in World War II and the Holocaust. The first freely elected government defined itself as center-right and “national” or “patriotic,” but it struggled to

establish a new cultural canon. Some of its representatives utilized antisemitic rhetoric and were met with opposition from Free Democrats, leading to growing ideological tensions. As a result, the ‘culture wars’ between the nationalists and “Westernizers” ignited within and around various cultural institutions and sectors, leading to the emergence of parallel structures that increasingly dominated Hungarian culture for the decades to come (Babarczy et al., 2017). A key unifying or crystallizing experience for conservatives was the 1994 political alliance between liberals and post-communists. The conservatives perceived it as a liberal betrayal of the central, unifying right-wing principle of anti-communism. Questions of identity and the relationship to European and global influences became a point of contention. Moreover, identification with the right and a rejection of left-liberal views reflected a concurrent backlash against EU liberalization and two decades of mismanaged Europeanization, resulting in increasing inequality between rich and poor, rural and urban, and labor and capital (Kürti, 2020a).

In this context, Fidesz embraced nationalist rhetoric to attract right-leaning voters immersed in the culture wars. As early as 2002, Fidesz established its own institutions of historical remembrance, such as the House of Terror – a museum to the memory of victims of fascism and communism. The purpose was to remind the nation of the suffering it had recently overcome (encouraging identification with a community of victimhood) and to link the perpetrators of the past to the Fidesz coalition’s left-wing political rivals (MSZP and SZDSZ) in the present (Nadkarni, 2020). Orbán’s party also pursued the establishment of its own rituals – from national holidays to the celebration of Fidesz’s anniversaries. At the same time, it was insinuated that the left and the liberals act in anti-national and internationalist ways, subjugating Hungary to foreign forces (such as the EU or the Soros Foundation). These actions contributed to the consolidation of strong identity politics that were to become far more prominent in the cultural script of the second and third Fidesz administrations and the creation of a devout base of support. Orbán claimed the exclusive political representation of the nation, and he manipulated identity construction to weaken the opposition who did not have a compelling idea to counter his politics (Bajomi et al., 2020).

Similarly, the liberal elites leading Poland through the democratic transition did not present a clear, systematic vision regarding Polish culture that would accommodate the challenges of a new era (Kurz, 2019). Since its creation, Law and Justice has relied on conservative thought in the party’s self-definition. Polish conservatives engaged in discursive work to elaborate Polish nationalism, grounded in the Polish romantic tradition and the promotion of Christian values, as an alternative to liberalism and socialism (following the shock of the victory of post-communists in the parliamentary election of 1993 and the presidential election of 1995). Before and during its first majority government (2005-2007), PiS advocated for an ‘affirmative’ approach to national history and patriotism, which draws heavily on romantic ideas and focuses solely on the promotion of positive and prideful elements of the national past and does not admit the discussion of problematic questions (Szeligowska, 2014). The conceptualization

of such ‘politics of history’ was reinforced through the state-run Institute of National Remembrance, which at the time focused primarily on navigating the debate of the role of Poles in the Holocaust, denying Poles’ role in the collaborations with the Nazis and in the extermination of Jews (Koncewicz, 2018). The right wing, as the only party milieu, had a clear, complete, and systematic approach to the social role of culture and its institutional basis (Kurz, 2019).

5.2 Implementation of the New Cultural Politics

Since its 2010 electoral win, Orbán’s government in Hungary implemented a new cultural policy to advance a single nationalist narrative and define alternative viewpoints as anti-Hungarian. Orbán has openly stated he would take a “cultural approach” to achieve Fidesz’s political goals. Hungary’s Prime Minister has declared his desire to politicize cultural narratives, stating, “An era is determined by cultural trends, collective beliefs, and social customs. This is now the task we are faced with: we must embed the political system in a cultural era.” The so-called culture war of Fidesz’s administration and the ideological approach to politics have been explained as a building block to “illiberal democracy” – a presumably democratic system that reflects Christian and nationalist values, which are said to have been suppressed by the country’s liberal minority. One of Fidesz’s strategies to create a less pluralistic and more politically unipolar Hungary has been taking control of the arts and cultural sector and refashioning it to serve the interests of the party’s agenda (Bozóki, 2015). The ruling government has introduced three main mechanisms of suppression – constitutional and legislative changes aimed at restricting free expression and expanding government regulatory authority over the arts, bureaucratic encroachment into and control over arts institutions, and government consolidation and manipulation of the media to curate nationalist cultural narratives and suppress alternative voices (Sethi, Bankston, Jurich, et al., 2022).

In a similar vein, PiS emphasized the duty of the Polish state to propose a coherent and attractive identity foundation to remain united and develop. This ideological space became an arena for political actions that aimed to “rebuild the nation” after its perceived demise during the rule of liberal democrats (Napiórkowski, 2019). Since PiS positions itself as a defender of Catholicism and Polishness against secularism and liberal cosmopolitanism, whoever goes in opposition to the values promoted by the party becomes the enemy of the state. This extends to cultural institutions and artists who do not align with this narrow understanding of what constitutes Polishness. PiS has made it a priority to reshape Poland’s arts and cultural scene to align with its socially conservative and nationalist beliefs. The concept of “pedagogy of shame” was coined, denoting post-communist liberals’ alleged policy to educate society by imbuing it with shame for the nation’s crimes and its backwardness (Dąbrowska, 2019). Instead, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, led by Piotr Gliński (also holding the position of the Deputy Prime Minister), has worked to emphasize the celebration of the Polish nation, the heroism of ethnic

Poles, the importance of Catholic values, and the dominance of the patriarchal family unit in Polish society. The new cultural policy has aimed to strengthen the bond of the nation and to not allow the reshaping of tradition according to the so-called “contemporary political correctness” (Pawłowski, 2016). Since taking over in 2015, PiS has appointed loyalists to key positions in museums, theaters, historical institutes, and public media outlets to promote its political vision. These new conservative leaders have not hesitated to cancel or censor expressions that do not align with the party's agenda. The justice system has also been used to censor voices that challenge the Catholic Church or the nation's reputation (in its narrow, nationalist interpretation) (Sethi, Bankston, Jurich Joscelyn, & Vadot, 2022).

In both countries, artists and cultural workers who do not conform to the political or social mainstream face difficulties finding work and have to deal with legal and financial repercussions, negative media attention, and, in some cases, personal or physical harm. Due to these consequences, many artists and cultural workers may choose to self-censor. Independent cultural institutions, such as galleries, music festivals, theaters, and publishers, have also faced government pressure and have often avoided controversial programming due to fear of losing state subsidies, unfavorable media coverage, and legal liability. The impact on the arts and cultural sector in both countries led to a significant deterioration in terms of freedom of expression and freedom of speech.

5.3 Fidesz's Suppression of the Arts

Orbán's regime considers culture important only as a means to help achieve its political goals. The illustration of this approach is the fact that education, research, the arts, cultural heritage, as well as healthcare and social care, all belong under the same ministry - first named the Ministry of National Resources, then renamed as the Ministry of Human Resources. The politicization of culture affects all of its aspects, thus abolishing the autonomy achieved by certain cultural areas. The fact that the area of culture does not have its own ministry leads to a lack of comprehensive cultural policy of the state – the only important consideration is whether those engaged in cultural activities are loyal to the regime. The loyalists, put in positions previously held by professionals, lack the expertise necessary to manage the preservation and development of culture, as well as the significance of maintaining the autonomies inherent in the sector. Instead, they echo the messages announced by Orbán. Moreover, the transition from ministerial oversight to the secretary level reduces transparency and makes access to the decision-making process more challenging or rather impossible. Likewise, efforts to influence and challenge centrally directed administrative and funding changes in the arts and cultural sector through democratic political campaigns have become jeopardized.

Institutional Control

The Hungarian Network of Academics (Oktatói Hálózat) detailed in its 2020 report, *Hungary Turns Its Back on Europe: Dismantling Culture, Education, Science and the Media in Hungary 2010-2019*, the worrisome trends characteristic for the current Hungarian cultural policy: the interpretation of culture in an exclusively national framework; the homogenization of the concept of culture and the rejection of cultural diversity; turning the symbols of Hungarian national identity into political instruments; a distorted view of history; enforcing retrograde, anti-modernity contents into the school curriculum; irresponsible management of cultural heritage; special treatment of certain institutions and areas with an informal relationship to the prime minister; harassment of prominent professionals; lack of professional grounding and honest social dialogue in decision-making processes; economic blackmail of institutions which resist centralization efforts, along with disruption of their activities; establishment of institutions loyal to the regime parallel to the already existing, well-embedded, relatively autonomous ones, and relocation of public resources to these new institutions (Bajomi et al., 2020). All of these combined contribute to the replacement of cultural policy with identity politics and symbolic politics and lead to the replacement of the old elites with new ones. Already in 2009, Orbán indicated that the main task of the cultural elite is to serve the “government of national affairs” and publicly represent its system of values.

One of the first attempts at consolidating control over Hungary's arts and cultural sector has been the inclusion of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA) in the 2010 Amended Constitution as a decision-making body that transformed it into a significant public entity. MMA's new leader, György Fekete, openly expressed the institution's commitment to promoting a Christian-Nationalist ideology and countering “liberal tendencies in contemporary arts.” Over time, MMA became closely linked with the Ministry of Human Resources, gaining influence in crucial arts and culture decisions and solidifying its position regardless of political changes. It exerted influence over the appointment of theatre directors and the allocation of resources in the fields of music, literature, contemporary fine arts, and film (Bajomi et al., 2020). These appointments have resulted in a dramatic shift towards conservatism in the national arts and culture leadership composition. The clear objective of reallocating resources and backing towards MMA was twofold: first, it aimed to replace the art establishment insisting on its independence, and second, it sought to establish a fresh cultural framework aligned with Fidesz and the National Cooperation System (NER), which stood in contrast to the existing cultural, literary, and artistic canon (Bajomi et al., 2020).

Funding Leverage and Centralization Process

In 2019, the introduction of the Culture Bill established a National Cultural Council (NCC) for the “centralized strategic steering of cultural sectors.” The NCC, whose president is elected by the

Hungarian government – decides which institutions are “culturally significant enough to receive funding for the next five years” (Bos, 2019).

Fidesz’s strategy relies on increasing political control over public funding for culture and diminishing the independent media that would report on anti-government protest movements. Cultural workers affected by these changes refer to this process as “desertification” – the reduced degree of independence of cultural creators gradually transformed Hungary’s cultural scene into a desert, an environment lacking meaningful independence, creative liberty, and financial prospects for artists.

The interlocutors interviewed in preparation for the Artistic Freedom Monitor (2022) - who chose to remain anonymous to remain persecuted, which is emblematic of the repressive atmosphere in the sector - recount the process described by the government as “centralizing.” For example, in the city of Székesfehérvár in central Hungary, five independent galleries were overtaken abruptly by a chancellor from the MMA. The galleries lost their independence, and the chancellor became the decision maker regarding what kind of art would be exhibited.

Babarczy (2017) observes that while outsourcing cultural policy and funding decisions to the MMA was met with widespread anger and calls for resistance within the contemporary art scene, a more robust solidarity movement has not followed. One of the reasons is the deeply divided nature of the Hungarian art world, with artists tied to Fidesz on one side and the opposition on the other. For example, when the MMA took over the Kunsthalle (the main venue of contemporary art in Budapest), the then director, initially appointed by Fidesz, refused to cooperate and resigned. However, due to his original connection with the ruling party, he was rejected by the liberal cultural elite and rejoined the Fidesz network in another position. The next director, with no previous connection to Fidesz or MMA, proposed an inclusive vision of art that is moving but not necessarily disruptive. Even though his exhibitions were far from a Christian-conservative vision of art, they were ridiculed by prominent liberal critics. The professional visitor’s main interest was to check who among the artists participated and who refused the invitation. However, resistance has become a moral dilemma in a climate where the refusal to participate leads to marginalization and professional obsolescence. Another reason for a lack of solid resistance to Fidesz’s policies is economic. Potential opposition affects various aspects of their professional lives, such as the ability to seek support for their work and secure certain jobs or commissions, leading to a dire financial situation. If artists abstain from engaging with public institutions, they might find themselves deprived of crucial public resources they contribute to through taxes.

It is important to note that there has been a lack of even basic forms of private or community funding in Hungarian cultural life. In the past, the Soros Foundation (the Open Society Foundation), established in 1984 by the Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros, functioned as a cultural sphere with its own policy that mostly supported liberal-leaning intellectuals, writers, and artists starting in the 1980s. It has been accused of contributing to the ‘cultural hegemony’ of the arts and culture in Hungary and became

a major target in the formation of a right-wing cultural elite. It was seen and labeled as an anti-national force despite supporting many projects involving Hungarians living beyond its borders (since the nationalism of the new right relied on nostalgia for ‘Greater Hungary’ – before the Treaty of Trianon in 1920). The cosmopolitan network of the Soros Foundation has become an embodiment of “the foreigner,” “the internal enemy,” and “the international Jew.” Eventually, in 2006, the Soros Foundation stopped its activities in Hungary due to political differences and disagreements over various policy issues between the foundation and the government. The closure had significant implications for cultural institutions and projects in the country, as it removed a significant source of funding and support for civil society and cultural initiatives. This change in funding dynamics contributed to the need for cultural institutions to tighten their budgets, as the new government paid little attention to the cultural sector. Consequently, most cultural institutions could only function with government support, whether state-owned or independent. In the Hungarian context, independence meant relying on one's income and smaller or larger sums won at state calls for applications (Bajomi et al., 2020). In practice, any deviation from the state-approved forms of artistic expression would lead to a lack of approval for state funding.

A striking example of the financial struggles of the “independent” institutions in the cultural sector is the reaction to the announcement of the President of the Open Society Foundation established by George Soros of a donation of 360 million HUF (around 1 million euro) to Summa Artium, an organization supporting arts that realize projects excluded from state funding. Pro-government media continued their narrative regarding the evil plan of George Soros, and theater groups that are in dire need of financial support opted out from applying. The fear of the government considering this donation as a provocation could result in a lack of the usual call for applications regarding the operation aid in the following year. Moreover, receiving more than 7.2 million HUF per year (around 19,000 euros) would force the non-profit organizations to change status to civil organizations supported from abroad, which puts it in a disadvantageous position (Bajomi et al., 2020).

Normalization and Self-Censorship

Many cultural workers who actively opposed the MMA's agenda through the Free Artists movement between 2012 and 2015 eventually gave up after years of unsuccessful activism. As a result, some now feel economically forced to collaborate with the very institutions they had previously protested against. The eventual submission is a consequence of a long and “deceptive process of normalization.”

These politics have affected Young artists in Hungary to the highest degree. Without an established career, refusal to engage with institutions related to the state means total exclusion from the art world and no prospect of developing a career at all. Emerging artists are thus forced to compromise their professional choices – in the artistic methods, thematic or ideological exploration, and modes of presentation – if they choose to apply for funding.

An artist interviewed by AFI who expressed that they would refuse to exhibit at a state institution if invited revealed that while they never encountered explicit resistance or challenges to their work, they feel threatened by the prospect of their work being taken down from exhibitions if Fidesz remains in power. They recount the need to practice a degree of self-restraint stemming from the fact that artists addressing political or social issues, not as activists but as artists, are seen as participants in the political arena and become susceptible to political threats. The risk of being drawn into a political struggle and becoming an easy target often leads to a decision to avoid ‘controversial’ topics.

Another interlocutor, a high-level arts administrator, described the removal of employees as a slow but systematic process. The cultural workers would be immediately removed as soon as their contracts expired. Call for applications would be opened, with candidates encouraged to submit their applications, with a panel of art critics assembled to assess the competition. Nonetheless, Fidesz loyalists had already been preselected, making it evident that independent candidates had no opportunity to retain their positions.

This systematic way in which the government replaced museum directors, curators, arts instructors, and other cultural producers was interpreted as a type of “retribution” enacted by artists with ties to Fidesz who felt ignored and sidelined during the center-left and Socialist coalition’s governments. An independent artistic collective interviewed by AFI believed that this group of individuals faced prior rejection from the contemporary art scene due to their conservative, nationalist, and Christian-based ideology, as well as their attempts to promote a specific narrative about Hungarian history. Upon Orbán's election, they experienced a sense of validation and triumph. According to the independent editor, many artists who had experienced some form of marginalization or non-acceptance during the period before Orbán's leadership were actively joining the MMA. Now, these voices are prominent contributors to Hungarian art and culture, essentially reshaping the cultural repertoire to emphasize figures, symbols, and subjects that are in harmony with Fidesz’s ideologies.

Media Takeover and Intimidation

The gradual takeover of media, including the introduction of the Media Act and the Press Act, resulted in the imposition of content restrictions on media outlets. These laws require media companies to register with the state and include various rules, such as mandating "balanced" coverage and warning viewers about content that might offend their beliefs. These laws also established the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) and the Media Council, responsible for regulating private media, including TV, radio, and web-based outlets. Furthermore, the state-appointed Media Council gained control over funding for the state's public service media, which comprises national TV stations, radio channels, and a news service. The media have also been used in Fidesz’s political campaign against the LGBTQ+ community. The new “anti-LGBTQ+” law attempts to restrict the public’s exposure to LGBTQ+ issues and themes in educational institutions and media, including broadcasting and

advertising of LGBTQ+-friendly content. Transmission of such content to minors has been criminalized, along with a ban on materials that address homosexuality and gender reassignment in primary education (Than, 2021). Such laws have a chilling effect on the arts and culture as artworks featuring LGBTQ+ themes or made by LGBTQ+ artists can result in censorship.

The government enacted legislation in 2020 and 2021, transferring administrative control of several universities and cultural institutions, including SZFE (University for Theater and Film Arts), to private foundations led by Orbán appointees. SZFE faced faculty resignations and student protests, gaining global attention with support from international artists. The government-appointed Board of Trustees subsequently canceled the fall semester and filled staff positions with individuals from government-controlled institutions (Sethi, Bankston, Jurich, et al., 2022). Smear campaigns against independent intellectuals critical of the government have also become a tactic to exert control over public opinion. In 2011, several internationally acclaimed philosophers were accused of misusing project funding, which they allegedly received from the previous socialist-liberal government for political reasons. A police report was filed after a media campaign, followed by an investigation by the police and the prosecutor's office that lasted almost two years. The investigation revealed no crime had been committed, but no moral rehabilitation followed. It can be argued that the real objective of the campaigns was not a criminal sentence but the denigration and discreditation of "inconvenient" intellectuals in the public eye (Verseck, 2012). The government's critics have been replaced by a new set of intellectuals – often young radicals devoted to Orbán. Since 2010, the sets of people governing the cultural sector have been replaced by Orbán multiple times – creating an atmosphere of total subjugation with no place for any form of dissent (Bajomi et al., 2020).

Another legal mechanism used to suppress voices and sanction a wide variety of creative expression is Hungary's defamation laws. These laws, found in Sections 226 and 227 of the Criminal Code, can lead to imprisonment for up to one year and significant fines. In 2013, Hungary amended the code and added a prison sentence of up to two years for "creating fake video or sound recordings with the intent to damage someone's reputation" (Sethi, Bankston, Jurich, et al., 2022).

Increased control over arts and cultural funding has instilled fear within Hungary's creative sector, affecting the choice of artists and projects that receive support. Arts institutions may avoid working with certain artists or materials to avoid negative consequences like funding cuts or job losses, stifling free expression. Some cultural decision-makers have chosen self-censorship to retain influence, while others have left or stopped producing art in Hungary due to the marginalization of critical voices and a lack of institutional support. An independent editor said during an interview included in the AFI report: "If you don't find an exhibition space for [your work] with institutional backing or connections if you don't have access to the media, that automatically creates a situation where there is less [...] space for you as an artist and [...] you can just stay in your little bubble. The government allows these bubbles to exist

because they know that if you don't find the funding, if you don't find spaces, if you don't have institutions, the rest will automatically happen, and you will be silenced in the end." Therefore, the limited options available to artists and cultural producers in Hungary, especially those openly critical of Orbán, have caused and continue to cause them to leave Hungary. Many artists who chose to leave were often forced to do so due to marginalization inflicted by the MMA and other major cultural institutions (Sethi, Bankston, Jurich, et al., 2022).

Independent artists are confronted with a challenging decision: they can either operate within alternative spaces with limited resources or align themselves with Fidesz's platform. While the general narrative underlines the importance of Christianity and patriotism, artists are not made to conform to stylistic norms or subject matters. Instead of overt censorship, Fidesz has effectively silenced alternative artistic voices and amplified the conservative and nationalist ones by controlling funding and governance (Babarczy et al., 2017).

5.4 PiS's Cultural Control

The new conception of cultural politics has justified the installation of a new cadre of right-wing leadership in visual arts institutions and museums, which have been reoriented towards PiS's political platform and promotion of conservative and nationalist values. Other means of achieving its goal of transforming the Polish cultural landscape include the persecution of artists creating works that oppose nationalist or Catholic beliefs through the legal system, the use of state-controlled media to promote conservative cultural ideologies and criticize leftist or non-conventional art, and the encouragement of non-government groups, like right-wing organizations and strict religious groups, to intimidate artists who do not conform to their views. As a result, art and artists that challenge the dominant nationalist narrative have been marginalized (Sethi, Bankston, Jurich Joscelyn, & Vadot, 2022).

Institutional Takeover – Management and Funding Control

The replacement of management of art institutions has been more overt in Poland than in Hungary. The Ministry of Culture exploits the ambiguity in Poland's Act on Organizing and Running of Cultural Activity, which grants the Minister of Culture the right to appoint and remove directors of museums and cultural institutions. The Act authorizes the Minister to either consult with a relevant trade union or hold an open competition before authorizing the appointment of a director to a cultural institution. Since 2015, PiS has largely eschewed holding open competitions and appointed party loyalists to manage arts institutions for ideological reasons. This has disrupted the traditional merit-based hiring processes in the arts, which typically yield candidates who align themselves with the mission of the arts institution rather than political ideology.

In the first year and a half of its tenure, the Ministry of Culture has unilaterally appointed ten directors out of fifteen open directorship positions. While the Ministry of Culture is obligated to consult a trade union in hiring decisions, there is no legal requirement to follow the union's recommendation. As a result, these appointments have been justified with the narrative of replacing the old liberal elites that led Poland toward cultural demise (Majewski, 2016). After winning re-election in 2019, PiS has accelerated its takeover of the remaining cultural institutions, and the directors of six of the most important national art museums in Poland have been replaced. These appointments have further centralized and politicized hiring practices in the cultural sector, including visual arts, historical memory, cultural diplomacy, theater, film, literature, music, and arts universities (Mrozek, 2022).

Another significant issue has been the allocation of funds dedicated to the cultural sector. PiS ministers and loyalists prioritize institutions aligned with the party's ideology. For example, the yearly grant program aimed at supporting the most valuable phenomena in Polish contemporary art has been under the control of Janusz Janowski, the newly appointed director of the Zachęta National Gallery of Art (the most important contemporary art museum in Poland) – with no previous connection to the contemporary art scene, who had publicly spoken on the Polish Radio warning against the dangers of “LGBT ideology.” In effect, the associations, foundations, and local cultural institutions that receive funding are close to those in power. The leading municipal contemporary institutions, acclaimed domestically and internationally, face refusal (Mrozek, 2022b).

Similar issues affected the theatre industry. Although the municipal government technically runs local theaters, the Ministry of Culture still has considerable power in appointing its managing directors. The Ministry of Culture has two channels of oversight over the appointment of directors. If the local government chooses to appoint a director without an open competition, the Ministry of Culture's consent is required for the appointee to assume the position. If the local government decides to hold an open call for applications, a jury must be formed to control the recruitment process. The jury consists of representatives from the local government, the Ministry of Culture, a local union, and a trade or artists' association. Since PiS's rise to power, the selection procedure has been obstructed by party members, particularly in theaters critical of the government or the party's conservative views (Płoski, 2017).

By effectively employing its oversight power, PiS has taken control of and turned Poland's cultural institutions into pillars of conservative ideology. Numerous highly qualified directors have been fired and replaced by underqualified but politically aligned candidates, negatively impacting the artistic output of the institutions and the communities of artists they support. Party loyalty is valued more than professional success. Considering that specific industries are primarily dependent on state support (for example, film) and that there is a lack of a robust private market for art in Poland, the political manipulations of the arts become more dangerous. The replacement of management of major cultural

institutions led not only to a rejection of their achievements but also facilitated the flow of financial resources to various institutions, communities, and individuals loyal to the government.

Those who are considered disloyal risk losing their jobs at the hands of the Ministry of Culture. For example, in October 2017, the Director of the Polish Film Institute (PFI), Magdalena Sroka, was abruptly removed from her position by the Minister of Culture. Minister Gliński publicly stated that Sroka had violated professional responsibilities and legal regulations. This decision was prompted by a letter sent by PFI to the Motion Picture Association of America, claiming that Polish filmmakers were facing censorship threats. Sroka claimed that she did not write or approve of the letter, and an internal investigation by PFI's board of advisors supported her, finding no violations on her part. However, disregarding these findings, the Ministry of Culture still dismissed Sroka from her position, ignoring official procedures for removing a director. Despite protests from filmmakers and industry figures, Sroka was replaced by Radoslaw Smigulski as the new Director of PFI in late 2017. In 2020, a Polish labor court ruled that Sroka's removal violated Poland's labor laws, but the case still exemplifies the willingness of PiS to ignore the institutional protocols, ignore the Board of Advisors' recommendations, and act illegally over statements criticizing the current political situation (Tizard, 2017).

Media and Fundamentalist Non-State Actors as Means of Suppression

Concerns have been raised over PiS politicians' use of their platform to criticize creators whose works present views that oppose the party's narratives. Leftist and non-conventional art has been criticized, and individuals who touch upon topics that do not align with PiS ideology have been under attack by fundamentalist persons and groups inspired and motivated by right-wing media coverage. Observers note that media outrage seems to be used to hyperbolize emotions and manipulate public opinion, as the coverage often gives a manipulated image of the works discussed. Public media outlets tend to interpret even mild criticism of Catholicism, nationalism, racism, sexism, or discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community as an insult to the Church or the Polish nation and initiate a smear campaign. Since 2015, PiS has enacted a media policy marked by intimidation, targeting independent media critical of the party, replacing independent media managers in public broadcasting, aligning public media content with PiS's agenda, and transferring media outlets to pro-PiS private companies.

Alongside contending with a right-wing government and media, artists and culture workers must grapple with the possibility that non-governmental organizations with religious and/or political affiliations could mobilize their supporters against them. Many of these groups have actively sought to interfere in artistic exhibitions, concerts, plays, and other creative activities. Four particular organizations stand out for their consistent attacks against artists: the Rosary Crusade for the Homeland, the Life and Family Foundation, Ordo Iuris, and the All-Polish Youth. The Ordo Iuris Institute already has two representatives in the Polish Supreme Court, and many people who work at or cooperate with this foundation have either been employed or appointed as experts in ministries and parliamentary

commissions. The ruling party supports many of these groups with substantial grants from the National Freedom Institute, a newly established state institution supporting civil society (Korolczuk, 2020). The attention and eagerness of religious fundamentalist non-governmental organizations to start campaigns and engage in legal action against creators is another reason to be careful about one's artistic output. For example, Ordo Iuris launched a website encouraging people to report cases of public insults against the Polish State. In this case, self-censorship can be employed as a self-protection strategy since many artists may not have the resources to defend themselves.

A harsh example of the combined action of media and fundamentalist groups fueling culture wars is the controversy surrounding the premiere of Oliver Friljić's play "Klątwa" ("The Curse"). The satirical play included a critique of national and religious symbols, with scenes that ridiculed the figures of John Paul II and Lech Kaczyński. Soon after the premiere, conservative outlets published reviews with recordings secretly made during the play that sensationalized certain elements, taking them out of context. Under the pretense of offense of religious sentiments, right-wing media campaigned to force the theater's management to remove the play from its program with a petition signed by 36,000 people. The far-right, neo-fascist All-Polish Youth reported to the Attorney General, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, the Mayor of Warsaw, and the management of the theater, requesting the play's takedown. Members of the organization also showed up in front of the theatre building to prevent the audience from entering. Widespread criticism of the play and Friljić led to the cancellation of ministerial grants of two festivals that collaborated with the director. Editors who prepared a segment on "The Curse" aired on TVP Kultura were fired, and the premiere of another play, including one of the actresses featured in "The Curse" was canceled from public television (Gruszczyński, 2019).

PiS politicians get involved in cultural debates on an unprecedented level, sharing their distastes for certain cultural productions. Quoted by right-wing outlets, the comments motivate and legitimize waves of negative responses from the general public, which sometimes lead to harassment of the artists responsible for the 'controversial' works. The recent Agnieszka Holland movie *Zielona Granica* (The Green Border) sparked national outrage long before its premiere. The film portrays the struggle of migrants from North Africa and the Middle East lured to the Belarusian-Polish border by false promises from the Belarusian government. Instead of safety, they become pawns in a political game orchestrated by Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, trapped between borders and refused refuge. Minister of Justice and Attorney General Zbigniew Ziobro equated Holland to Nazi propagandists on Twitter and suggested that the director is either in the service of the Germans or is playing the role of a useful idiot acting on their behalf. On the day of the movie's premiere, the Committee of the Council of Ministers for National Security and Defense set an official meeting to condemn the movie. Minister of National Defense Mariusz Błaszczak stated that the film "besmirches the reputation of Poland and the good name and honor of the soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces, officers of the Border Guard, and officers of the Polish police." The right wing accused the director of aligning herself with the Kremlin's narrative and

engaging in anti-Polish propaganda. During a meeting with the members of Poland's Border Guard, President Andrzej Duda repeated their chant, "Only pigs go to the cinema," and Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński vehemently stated that the film was not funded by the Ministry of Culture or the Polish Film Institute (Mrozek, 2023). These incidents illustrate how right-wing media and PiS politicians not only suppress the arts but also shape public discourse about artistic works, motivating extreme reactions of the public.

Public Insult Laws – Defamation Law

International and domestic observers note that the Polish government and judiciary continue to enforce the criminal defamation and public insult laws enumerated in the Polish Penal Code, significantly infringing upon an individual's constitutional right to freedom of expression. Such criminal sanctions employ a chilling effect on freedom of expression and spawn self-censorship concerning open public discourse (Moran, 2018). Poland has nine different insult laws, including one that covers state symbols, and they all come with potential prison terms. In the 2017 report by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) looking at insult and defamation laws among 57 countries, Poland had the joint highest number (Griffen, 2017).

Article 226 of the Penal Code and Articles 133, 135, and 137 criminalize defamation of public officials, the Polish nation, the President of Poland, and Polish national symbols. Lawsuits pursuant to these statutes are referred to as strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPP) and are often designed to curb free speech and public debate on human rights issues. Defamation is a civil matter in most countries; however, Poland also allows private parties to file civil or criminal actions for defamation under Article 212 of the Polish Penal Code. The criminal option offers a distinct advantage for aggrieved parties as they can initiate defamation suits but have the responsibility and cost of litigation covered by The State. A conviction under the statute includes up to one year of imprisonment and/or substantial fines (Sethi et al., 2022). International human rights organizations have strongly criticized criminal defamation as being an excessive restriction on freedom of speech. The UN Human Rights Committee has suggested that countries should either abolish such laws or only use them in extreme circumstances and never as a means of imprisonment. The mere existence of criminal defamation laws has a discouraging effect on the media and freedom of expression and is often abused by governments to silence opposition and criticism (Human Rights Committee, 2011). In Poland, these laws have been targeted at cultural institutions and individuals critical of the government. According to a report by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, while there were "60 convictions [for media-related criminal defamation] in 2012, the number [...] more than doubled to 137 convictions in 2017 and 118 in 2018" (Ciobanu, 2021).

One of the most recent and widely debated examples of the misuse of the defamation law is the 2021 case of a writer, journalist, and government critic Jakub Żulczyk who was charged with defaming

the President of Poland after tweeting “Andrzej Duda is a moron” in relation to the president’s comment about the US elections. About a year and a half later, the charges were dropped by a regional court (Dłużewska, 2022). However, the lengthy legal battle highlighted two concerning developments in Poland. Firstly, the charges were not brought forward by President Duda but by a private entity, which allowed the president to escape responsibility for prosecuting a baseless lawsuit. This means that private conservative individuals and organizations can make criminal allegations in the name of the state, allowing political figures to appear as if they are not involved in silencing free expression while still maintaining some degree of deniability. Secondly, the comments made by artists and activists are under scrutiny by numerous right-wing groups and individuals, who threaten them with lawsuits for any statement that goes against conservative beliefs (Sethi et al., 2022). The most prominent organizations that serve as mouthpieces for the far right and actively report blasphemy and defamation cases to law enforcement are the aforementioned Ordo Iuris, the Anti-Defamation League, and the All-Polish Youth.

Offense of Religious Beliefs – the Blasphemy Law

Another law abused during PiS cadency is Article 196 of the Polish Penal Code (1997), the so-called blasphemy law. According to Article 196 of the Penal Code, individuals can face penalties, including fines, restrictions on liberty, or up to a two-year prison sentence if found guilty of offending religious beliefs through public criticism of an object or a place of worship, which contradicts international and regional regulations safeguarding freedom of expression. The law's ambiguity grants Polish authorities substantial discretion in determining what constitutes an offense. While criminalizing incitement to hatred against a particular religious group is reasonable, Poland's blasphemy law encompasses a broader range of behaviors that do not promote violence, thereby limiting open discourse and pluralism, which are essential principles of democracy. According to the Venice Commission, in a democratic society, religious groups should tolerate critical public discussions and debates about their beliefs. The European Court of Human Rights has also affirmed that freedom of expression protects speech that may be provocative or unsettling to religious feelings. Article 25 mandates that Polish officials remain impartial concerning personal beliefs, including religious and philosophical convictions. Nevertheless, the Catholic clergy and advocates continue to exert significant social and political influence in Poland, making cases brought under Article 196 a pivotal tool for them to assert their presence in public affairs (Freedom House, 2011). The effect of the law places undue limits on freedom of expression and encourages self-censorship.

Even though the right-wing parties in Poland have long used the blasphemy law to intimidate voices that do not align with catholic values, PiS's victory in 2015 increased the number of cases significantly. In 2016, ten criminal indictments were brought forward for violating Article 196, but by the first eleven months of 2020, there were twenty-nine. Additionally, the number of cases brought before the prosecutor's office in Poland has increased, with 90 cases in 2018, 136 in 2019, and 146 in 2020. The

use of the "blasphemy law" indicates a broader trend where conservative individuals and institutions exploit the Polish legal system to stifle non-conforming social norms. Most allegations of "religious insults" pertain to Catholicism. Consequently, the law effectively acts as a shield safeguarding a specific institution from scrutiny and conveys to the public that the Catholic Church enjoys special protections against critical viewpoints, including those expressed through artistic means (Sethi et al., 2022).

One of the loudest cases of recent years is the case involving human rights activist Elżbieta Podleśna, who was arrested for blasphemy in May 2019 after distributing posters of an artwork called "Maria of Equality" – an image depicting the Virgin Mary with her halo painted in rainbow colors of the LGBTQ+ pride flag. Podleśna and two other activists shared the artwork as a way of expressing their opposition to the Catholic Church's complicity in spreading hateful narratives about the LGBTQ+ community, namely addressing the case of Tadeusz Łebkowski, who created an installation in his church in which he equated "LGBT" and "gender ideology" to sexual perversion and seven deadly sins. Soon after the demonstration, Podleśna (an activist with a history of criticism towards the church and the state) was arrested in her home at 6 in the morning and accused of insulting religious sentiments under Article 196. The Minister of Internal Affairs Joachim Brudziński thanked the policemen involved in the case on social media, normalizing the repression and encouraging further attention of right-wing supporters to the case. After two years of trial, the activist was found not guilty in March 2021. Members of *Ordo Iuris* pursued an appeal, but the court later upheld the decision in January 2022, pointing to the discriminatory character of Łebkowski's actions (Piasecki & Jędrzejczyk, 2022). Aside from being an illustration of the attacks on free speech, this case also points to the level of discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community and its supporters, legitimized by the state and its institutions in contemporary Poland.

Targeting of the LGBTQ+ Community

In 2023, for 4th time in a row, Poland scored last in the ILGA-Europe report, which ranks European countries based on a review of laws and policies affecting LGBTQ+ people (Camut, 2023). Since 2019, the primary target of the far-right coalition led by PiS and the ultraconservative groups has been the LGBTQ+ community. The term "LGBT ideology" replaced "gender ideology" (present in the public discourse since 2012) to insinuate that those advocating for gender and sexual equality are secretly dangerous individuals aiming to undermine the "traditional" family, the nation, and ultimately, the "Christian civilization." The main accusations against the LGBTQ+ community include allegations of pedophilia, "Christianophobia," and a desire to tear down the Catholic Church, which is depicted as the robust foundation of the Polish nation. Similarly to the arguments used by Fidesz in Hungary, Polish anti-gender activists spread false information suggesting that gay men are disproportionately more prone to pedophilia and that sex education in schools is, in fact, just a smokescreen for the 'sexualization' of children, which in turn makes them easy prey for sexual predators (Korolczuk, 2020).

An alarming instance of PiS's intimidation tactics involves the establishment of 'LGBT-free zones' in 2019, with approximately 100 regions and municipalities adopting non-binding resolutions declaring themselves free from 'LGBT ideology.' These declarations significantly discouraged residents and institutions from supporting LGBTQ+ human rights due to fear of reprisals or funding loss, as noted by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020). In response to these resolutions, Polish LGBTQ activist Bart Staszewski devised a striking protest by installing yellow warning signs reminiscent of military signage, with the inscription "LGBT-free zone" translated into four languages on roads leading to these municipalities. Staszewski's social media post featuring the sign went viral, prompting the attention of European Parliament members who urged the European Commission to take action (Ambroziak, 2020). Due to the EU's warning that regions declaring themselves LGBT-Free might lose EU funding, several provinces revoked their resolutions. However, right-wing media outlets publicly blamed Staszewski for jeopardizing EU funds, leading to the activist receiving death threats and facing defamation lawsuits from three municipalities. These lawsuits contended that Staszewski's artwork misrepresented them as "LGBT-Free zones" instead of places free of "LGBT ideology." Furthermore, Staszewski faced police charges for the alleged illegal placement of road signs, a charge perceived by many as disproportionate. Notably, the cases against him extended over two years, requiring his presence in courts across Poland. Staszewski reported that these cases were initiated following notifications from Ordo Iuris, MP Sobolewski, and MP Mularczyk from Law and Justice. While some cases went to court, others were protracted and eventually dismissed. The police conducted investigations, interviewed witnesses, sought surveillance recordings, and collected fingerprints. Many observers interpreted these actions as a coordinated effort to systematically intimidate activists and whistleblowers (Sarniewicz, 2021).

These SLAPP suits exemplify the treacherous legal terrain artists navigate when openly challenging PiS policies and underscore the extent to which PiS has weaponized the legal system to penalize dissenting artistic expression. Activists and artists have reported that protracted legal proceedings, including court orders and appeals from the General Prosecutor's office, have resulted in burnout, health issues, particularly related to mental well-being, and in some instances, a deterioration of their professional circumstances, prompting some to contemplate leaving the country (Amnesty International, 2022).

5.5 Country Comparison

The main difference between the cultural politics of Hungary and Poland is that the changes enacted in Hungary have been adopted more discreetly and less overtly. This relatively subtle strategy may account for the delayed response from the international community regarding Fidesz's takeover. In Poland, the Ministry of Culture has openly either terminated directors or chosen not to renew their contracts on

ideological grounds, replacing them with far-right leaders often sharing contentious views on topics such as LGBTQ+ rights, the Holocaust, or migration. In Hungary, the Academy of the Arts became a unique case as it is a private foundation legitimized by the state in a constitution, which engaged in a slow and gradual takeover of the whole sector, appointing political allies to the boards of both major and minor institutions under the guise of legality.

While during communism, it was customary for the government to censor the arts, Poland and Hungary's membership in the European Union prevents the ruling parties from overt censorship. For this reason, cultural institutions are being changed from within, and control is exerted through obscure foundations and bureaucratic structures instead. In this way, if the management of the institutions exercises control over the kind of art that is being exhibited (as it is their right), it does not directly violate freedom of expression. The new framework is designed to facilitate the production and exhibition of art aligned with their nationalist ideology. Independent artists are 'free' to create any type of work, but in reality, they face significant obstacles when it comes to the prospect of funding, exhibition, and reception. Disloyalty would be punished by termination, and funding would only be granted to projects aligned with party lines. Hence, an atmosphere of fear, self-restraint, and self-censorship dominates the whole sector in a quiet manner.

In Poland, under the guise of respect for religious feelings, media engagement and the subsequent attention of religious fundamentalist individuals and organizations has been more pronounced in the context of arts and culture than in Hungary. Hungary's defamation law exists as a threat, but it is the institutional suppression that has a more considerable chilling effect on the creators. In Poland, the use of insult and blasphemy laws has been on the rise since Law and Justice's takeover, and while international organizations have condemned the active persecution of artists, it still is very much an issue that leads to self-censorship.

In Hungary, the illiberal turn in art meant not so much a new canon or aesthetic but a rejection of anything and anyone liberal. It is a continuation of the culture war and one of Orbán's political tools for attracting more people to support Fidesz. In Poland, it is the domination of Catholic Nationalism in the public sphere that legitimizes attacks on freedom of expression. Since liberal values are presented as a threat to tradition and national sovereignty, non-state actors, such as NGOs, legal service providers, religious groups, youth organizations, and private individuals, may feel the need to act as guardians of conservative values. They fervently uphold Polish nationalism and allegiance to the Catholic Church while displaying hostility towards minorities, feminists, and LGBTQ+ individuals. This is a distinguishing element of the Polish cultural sector, and for PiS, these non-state entities serve as a means to extend the party's influence beyond its formal political structure, disseminating its core ideology at the grassroots level. Simultaneously, PiS can distance itself from the more extremist actions of these non-state actors, asserting no official association with such groups or individuals. In turn, non-state

actors gain a sense of solidarity with PiS through affiliation (Sethi, Bankston, Jurich Joscelyn, & Vadot, 2022).

Furthermore, over the past decade, PiS has increasingly aligned itself with the Catholic Church in Poland despite the Church officially professing political neutrality. Fundamentalist non-state actors perceive themselves as protectors of Catholicism and Polish nationalism, thus taking on a significant role in monitoring and censoring creative expression that could be seen as offensive to the Polish Church or detrimental to the Polish nation. In Hungary, state religion has become a political instrument in constructing a new religious-political narrative in which values became one of the defining features of Orbán's cultural policy. Orbán's government has involved the churches in its culture war, using them in the service of ideological retraining. The party exploits religious sentiments for its own legitimation, the sacralization of power, and the justification of its timelessness and unquestionability (Bajomi et al., 2020).

After the 2010 elections in Hungary and the 2015 elections in Poland, the idea of a conservative utopia has been used to justify the anti-democratic turn of both governments - since what is at stake is the moral renewal of the nation. The efforts to support their politics with themes of nationality, tradition, religion, and shared cultural origins seem to have paid off in sustaining a stable electorate. The takeover of the art and culture sector has been one of the means of shaping and mainstreaming narratives of what constitutes national belonging and what does not, as well as controlling the discourse on national and historical memory. In line with Kneuer's (2021) definition of democratic erosion, the cultural politics of Fidesz and PiS constitute the legitimizing narrative that ties the political transformation to an alternative model with an appealing ideology that can mobilize at least a large part of the population. Considering the sustained electoral support, it seems like a successful approach to maintaining control over the public discourse and staying in power.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, this dissertation explored the role of cultural politics, specifically its use for the attacks on the arts and culture sectors, as a mechanism of democratic erosion in Hungary and Poland. The comparative analysis of the political landscapes in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic exposed how the trajectories of democratic transition, in combination with underlying country-specific cultural, political, and historical factors, paved the way for the ascension to power of political groupings representing two different kinds of populism – national populism in Hungary and Poland, and technocratic populism in the Czech Republic.

The post-1989 political landscape, despite sharing some similarities, exhibited distinct differences with implications for the development of political systems that were revealed in the comparative analysis in the first chapters. The legacy of communism posed a challenge for left-wing parties in prioritizing redistribution, and this absence of a significant economic divide between the Left and Right created an opportunity for populists to exploit in Poland and Hungary. The Czech political scene was marked by a diversity of parties and political ideologies where economic policies and European integration remained the main points of contention. While debates over cultural and social issues occurred, they did not generate “cultural wars” of the intensity observed in Hungary and Poland. In those countries, two political fronts with two differing ideological conceptions of nationalism and state-building dominated the public sphere. Those ideological divisions contributed to growing societal polarization, as these divisions affected the voters’ identification with the values represented by the two fronts. In both countries, the weakness of liberal democracy turned out to be its negligence of identity politics and a lack of clear programmatic ideas for the conception of modern Poland and Hungary. Fidesz and PiS understood this milieu and supported their programs with cultural politics, which embraced country-specific histories, sentiments, and traditions. In combination with promises of welfare benefits, those sentiments turned into building blocks and legitimizing tools for new policies that helped the populists achieve and sustain electoral support.

Another significant difference revealed during the analysis was the relationship between the state and the church. The Czech Republic is the most secular country in Europe, and historically, it has always striven for independent statehood. In Poland, the relationship with the Catholic church has a long history and has been influential in the evolution of the Polish political culture as well as the development of Polish national identity. In Hungary, it had no such role historically. Still, Fidesz succeeded in turning state religion and Catholic values into a political instrument to construct a new religious-political narrative supporting Orbán’s new cultural policy. Both countries exploited religion as a means of legitimation, sacralization of power, and the justification of its unquestionability. The nationalist quasi-catholic discourses centered on traditional gender roles, patriarchal family values, and the glorification of the state while at the same time targeting the opposition, minorities, immigrants (particularly refugees), Muslims, Jews, political dissidents, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. These groups

are associated with liberalism, which is externalized as a non-national, or in some cases, anti-national endeavor that prioritizes foreign values and the directives of the European Union. It is a powerful narrative for social mobilization due to the history of prolonged foreign domination. In this context, liberalism becomes the latest in a series of projects undertaken by foreign forces to subjugate the nation and threaten its sovereignty (Brubaker, 2017). All in all, Poland exemplifies a nation where religious and national loyalties harmoniously intertwined, while Hungary has experienced the resurgence of religious nationalism, albeit based on a surrogate of religion, shaping a new value system. In both countries, the concept of the "chosen nation" was invoked to safeguard their civilizations from Western liberal values, with a retrospective mindset characteristic of traditional, history-oriented societies prevailing.

This vital context explains the potential of national populism in Hungary and Poland and its lack of grounding in the Czech Republic. ANO resorted to anti-elitist and anti-establishment appeals, prying on the nation's frustration with the current political system characterized by corruption and the rising gap between the elites and the rest of society. As these frustrations were shared by the supporters of both the right and left-leaning parts of the electorate, ANO avoided strict ideological bonds to arrive at the highest number of potential voters. It has remained mainly at the center.

Another difference is the extent of illiberal changes enacted by Babiš. The definition of democratic erosion developed by Kneuer assumes three mechanisms: a sequenced approach starting with an electoral victory leading to the reconfiguration of checks and balances of power and the limiting of political freedoms and civil rights; legalism, meaning changes enacted in a constitutional manner; and a legitimizing narrative that ties the transformation to an alternative model with an appealing ideology that is able to mobilize at least a large part of the population. Both Fidesz and PiS succeeded in enacting control over key institutions, the media, and the electoral processes. The checks and balances have been systematically weakened, and civil rights undermined through legal and constitutional changes. The introduction of cultural politics and appeals to conservative and nationalist sentiments helped to maintain legitimacy and sustained electoral support. In the case of ANO, the institutions of control, such as the Constitutional Court, have remained largely independent and not been successful, and the legitimizing narrative of anti-elitism has not succeeded in guaranteeing the number of votes necessary for a majority rule. Babiš used his political power to weaken his business opponents and exploit his media power to affect the senior coalition partners. ANO's politics thus illustrate a possibly alternative definition of democratic erosion in the form of political disruption (breaking with the old party system) rather than a straightforward takeover of existing institutions and political parties. The case of a billionaire-turned-politician serves as a reminder that anti-establishment parties can serve as vehicles for vested economic interests (Vachudova, 2020), as well as an articulation of genuine societal demands for political reform and good governance (Cianetti et al., 2018).

A central finding of this research is that cultural politics, as adopted by regimes like Fidesz and PiS, act not only as tools for suppressing dissent but also as powerful legitimizing narratives. By channeling state institutions and cultural sectors to endorse nationalist discourses and traditional values, these parties construct ideological frameworks that resonate with significant portions of their populations, solidifying their grip on power. The takeover of cultural institutions by party loyalists, media campaigns, the legal persecution of individuals that go against the official narratives promoted by the government, and the involvement of non-state religious fundamentalist organizations (in Poland) all contributed to an atmosphere of fear and intimidation leading to self-restraint and self-censorship of artists and cultural workers. Managerial control hides under a cloak of legality – in this system, formal censorship is not necessary because ideological conformity is inherently guaranteed from within.

In a broader context, the examination of recent histories and the distinctive characteristics of Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic sheds light on the intricate nature of the Central and Eastern European region, challenging oversimplified Western analyses. This research reinforces the notion that artistic freedom, akin to freedom of expression, is a fundamental civil and human right, holding profound implications for the resilience of democratic societies. This dissertation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms of democratic erosion and the vital role of culture in shaping political landscapes, inviting further exploration of these multifaceted dynamics in future studies.

6.1 Limitations and further research

While this dissertation has provided an in-depth analysis of the role of cultural politics in democratic erosion, it is important to acknowledge that there are various theories on democratic backsliding and erosion. The scope of this paper did not allow for an exhaustive examination of all relevant theoretical perspectives. Future research could explore the intersections and divergences between different theoretical frameworks to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Similarly, the study engaged with the concept of populism, which is multifaceted and subject to various definitions. Due to constraints, this paper focused on specific aspects of populism relevant to the research questions. A more extensive exploration of populism's nuances and its manifestations in the studied countries could offer valuable insights.

The limited length of this paper also restricted an in-depth investigation of the role of far-right organizations in each country despite indications of their rising influence in the Czech Republic. Far-right movements are complex actors with diverse agendas, and their impact on democratic erosion is a subject that merits further research attention. Future studies could delve into the dynamics between far-right groups and cultural politics.

While the general argument suggests that the Czech Republic is less conservative than Hungary and Poland, it is essential to recognize that conservative sentiments and nationalist, xenophobic tendencies have also been on the rise within the Czech society. This complexity warrants a deeper examination of the ideological landscape and how it influences political developments.

In terms of research regarding arts, culture, and freedom of expression, the discussion of the role of civil society could be beneficial in the context of democratic erosion. Investigation of spaces of resistance could be helpful to understanding where and how artists challenge repressive environments. Furthermore, investigating the influence of international institutions, such as the European Union, in defending cultural liberties within democratic backsliding contexts could enhance the understanding of global responses to democratic erosion through the lens of artistic expression. These directions offer avenues for further inquiry into the relationship between culture and democracy.

As with many studies involving political phenomena, the situation in the countries examined is subject to change over time. The findings reflect the state of affairs up to the knowledge available until September 2023.

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