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November 2025

The illiberal playbook

The 'Orbanisation' of European public discourse



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1.

An illiberal playbook

Donald Trump's return to the White House would seem to have set off an authoritarian avalanche in Europe, too. But this catastrophe is by no means an unexpected one: the breakdown of the rule of law and democratic principles has not been sudden, and neither are its origins to be found solely overseas. In fact, parties such as Hungary's Fidesz, Italy's Fratelli d'Italia and Lega, France's Rassemblement National, Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Poland's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) and Austria's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) are mobilising an incessant diatribe against minorities and European political integration which is fragmenting European societies from within.

"Mine is a cultural and ideological battle," said French xenophobic right-wing politician Éric Zemmour as far back as 2011, marshalling, distorting and manipulating Gramsci's cultural hegemony concept:

"I have turned the left wing's weapons against it. I have infiltrated the TV propaganda machine, mingling with actors, singers, and the people themselves."

Using a network of think tanks as outposts from which to keep their connections and exchanges alive, Europe's far

right movements have experimented with tactics and shared strategies between them, thereby cementing a common action plan. This illiberal playbook works like a battering ram, gradually, blow by blow, year after year, changing the character of public debate, fragmenting our societies from within and occupying progressively greater space in the public domain.

In March 2025, the Heritage Foundation – the Donald Trump-associated think tank known for drawing up the authoritarian *Project 2025* plan – brought the exponents of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, Orbán's soft power machine, and the Polish Ordo Iuris institute, close to PiS and known for its work on the battle against abortion rights, together in Washington to discuss the 'Great Reset'. *The Great Reset* is not simply the title of a publication written by MCC and Ordo Iuris. It is, first and foremost, a plan to break up the European Union into its nation state components, and there is nothing surprising about the fact that the White House, whose president and vice-president are opposed to a united Europe, has taken up this opportunity.

But another 'great reset' is underway in the way public debate is structured, one which began more than 15 years ago. It is a reset based on a single starting point: enemy building. And understanding how this works requires us, first of all, to look at the man who has made illiberalism his trademark, the drift to authoritarianism his export system and anti-Brussels rhetoric his leitmotif: Viktor Orbán.

2. The dominant message

Hungary's drift to authoritarianism – under way since 2010 and now in its mature phase – began with taking control of the press, developing its control over the economy and society and radicalising by repressing dissent. And this is especially effective when this shift is not quickly checked – i.e. the EU's failure to crack down on Orbán's autocratic tendencies, resulting in a full-blown epidemic via which Viktor Orbán's action plan has been exported. A case in point is Robert Fico's return to power in Slovakia: the Slovak leader (whose SMER party refers to itself as social-democratic) has made use of Orbán's consultants as well as close contact with the man himself. There are many reasons behind this closeness – proximity to Moscow, Hungary's interest in having a supporter on the European Council after Donald Tusk replaced Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland – but what the direction taken by the Hungarian and Slovak leaders really shows us is something else as well: a shift to authoritarianism is dictated not solely by the drive for ever greater power and control but, above all, by the fear of losing it. As compared to the man who governed Hungary in the late 1990s, the illiberal Orbán of the post-2010 autocratic shift differs for one reason only: the fact of having lost power in 2002. Fico similarly lost power in 2018 when he was forced to resign in the wake of the protests following on from the assassination of a journalist, Ján Kuciak. There is no need to point out here that Donald Trump, whose authoritarian tendencies were already clear – is a previous occupant of the White House and himself lost the presidency in 2020.

It is not simply a hunger for power, but the fact of having lost it, which triggers illiberal tendencies: a desire not simply to rule a nation but also to remodel it, acting on its press, judiciary, culture, economy and politics.

The first step in an illiberal plan such as this is attempts to control information and thus the public discourse and opinion. In this respect Budapest has much in common with Bratislava, and they both share a great deal with Rome.

In 2024 Italy joined the World Press Freedom Index's 'problematic nations' club – which Orbán is a member of. The following year, Italy's ranking in the 2025 index fell further to 49th position.

"Meloni has tangibly reduced press freedom," reported Pavol Szalai, head of the EU Reporters Sans Frontières office.

Attacks on press freedom, an increase in the use of gagging orders by politicians against those investigating them and, to an even greater extent, the changes under way in public broadcasting have all set alarm bells ringing for a series of freedom of information bodies, united in a task force (Media Freedom Rapid Response made up of the European Federation of Journalists, the International Press Institute, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, Article 19 Europe and Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa) which carried out an urgent Italy mission in 2024. The report which followed on from this was emblematically entitled *Silencing the fourth estate: Italy's democratic drift* ("Silenziare il quarto stato: la democrazia in bilico in Italia"). Its conclusions make clear that attacks on press freedom are a common first step taken by leaders with illiberal tendencies, with the terms used being "intolerance by the governing coalition to any form of press criticism", "a serious reduction in freedom of expression" and "weakening of democratic quality."

A further common feature of governments with illiberal leaders is portraying awkward journalists as enemies of the nation: "Meloni, Fico, Orbán, they're all doing it," argues Beata Balogová, the multi-award winning director of Slovakia's most important newspaper, SME, herself the target of attacks by the Fico government.

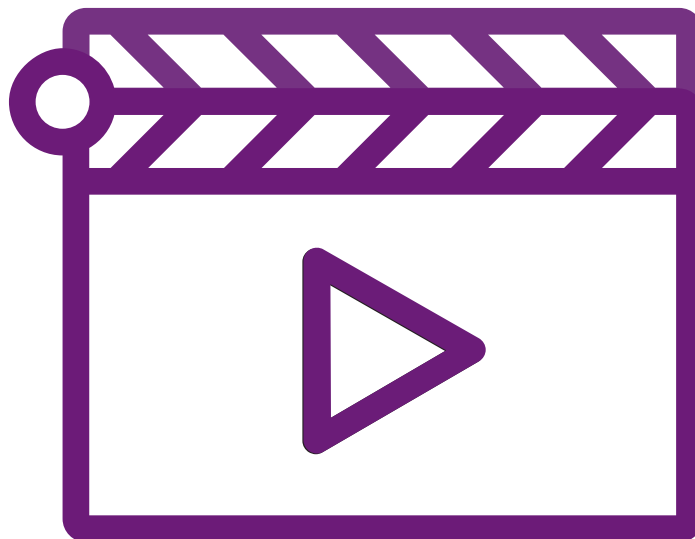
"Controlling broadcasting is a key element in this. Fico has been quite open about this: the role of journalists is not to monitor those in power but to report the good things they do. Initially the government thought in terms of a law which was to set up a body tasked for all intents and purposes with assessing public service content, i.e. censoring it. When the EU bridled this was removed from the draft law but Fico had no difficulty all the same in taking control of the public broadcasting service. This has always been subject to political control, but now it's a full blown government propaganda department, following the prime minister's orders. An example is pro-Ukrainians being called warmongers."

The illiberal playbook is international and while Viktor Orbán may have been the forerunner of this trend, some of its new European incarnations are more aggressive than him. “In some ways Fico has gone further than the Hungarian leader, with the latter never engaging in personal attacks on journalists,” observed Balogová from Bratislava. But the same might be said of Rome.

The attack on press freedom began in 2010 in Hungary, step by step with the drift towards authoritarianism. The first step was a press law which sanctioned a government takeover of the public press, to a few protests from Brussels. Then, in 2016, Népszabadság, the main opposition newspaper, was struck down, taken over by a government appointee, Heinrich Pecina, and then destroyed. This model was described in 2017 by the then head of the Austrian far right as a “Hungarian model” to export: during an evening in Ibiza which led to his dismissal, Heinz-Christian Strache, said “we must do what he did”, like Pecina. 2018 was the year Kesma (Central European

Press and Media Foundation), a conglomerate incorporating TV, newspapers and radio, was set up, a total of five hundred editorial products, an unprecedented concentration of pro-governmental press outlets. While Kesma was morphing into a giant and Orbán’s social and economic stranglehold was growing tighter, free press outlets were falling like dominoes, closing down or worse, surviving in propaganda form (Origo is a case in point).

Controlling the message to ensure that one’s own is the dominant one; this is undoubtedly the first step on the illiberalism ladder. But there is another step which is equally determinant, because power – including the power to shape the media ecosystem – is the goal. Where getting elected and then taking increasing control is concerned, the playbook recommends a tool which is as well tested as it is effective – enemy-building. Divide and rule is fundamentally important to any understanding of the workings of the illiberal mechanism.



3. Enemy building

“The boundaries of our freedom perimeter are the levels of power we are able to achieve.” So said the young Orbán in 1990, at a time when he was not only charismatic but also liberal. His movement was funded by the Soros Foundation – thanks to which the founder of Fidesz had also obtained an Oxford study bursary – but in the space of just a few years later George Soros had become one of the Hungarian prime minister’s favourite enemies. That summer speech in Tusnádfürdő in Romania in 2014, in which he set out his ‘illiberal state’ manifesto, may seem a long time ago now. But the Hungarian leader has remained true to his unchanging obsession with power. And it is precisely this obsession which explains the tangible drift to authoritarianism since his 2010 election victory.

After his first, 1998–2002, period in power, Orbán experienced what losing power means. So when he was re-elected in 2010 he was determined to hang on to power at any cost, even if that cost was modifying the democratic equilibria.

The secret behind Viktor Orbán’s aggressive return to power is, first and foremost, the ‘Finkelstein Formula’, a negative formula whose basis is not support for something, but opposition to something. It was excogitated by Republican strategist Arthur Jay Finkelstein, who the Fidesz party turned to on the strength of his consultancy work for Ronald Reagan and Benjamin Netanyahu. Together with his heir apparent George Birnbaum, Finkelstein formulated an electoral campaign strategy for Orbán from 2008 onwards which he is still using today, enemy-building.

George Soros was the enemy of choice right from the start but the list of enemies has got longer as the years have gone by, in line with the Orbán power cycle. The 2019 election posters targeted George Soros, and the then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker. In 2023 the strategy was used once again with their heirs, Soros’ son, Alex, and Juncker’s successor at the apex of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. The strategy was reused and hybridised. It was used on the internal opposition and the 2022 election poster enemies were, first and foremost, the leader of the united opposition, Péter Márki-Zay shown alongside former prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. It was also turned against the leaders of the EU, despite Orbán’s hopes for compromise, primarily with a view to thawing the country’s frozen EU funds.

The, by then, tried and tested Finkelstein formula was then employed all over Europe by Orbán’s allies, sometimes sim-

ply in cut and paste version. An example is the way Lega leader Matteo Salvini imitates Orbán’s attack on George Soros, who he called an “unscrupulous speculator” seven years ago. A more recent example is Giorgia Meloni’s defence of the actions of Elon Musk, the world’s richest man, during the German election campaign in which, in her capacity as prime minister, she emulated this opposition to Soros (as did Musk himself):

“I have seen no evidence that Elon Musk is funding parties, associations or politicians. George Soros, for example, is doing this,”

she said at her end-of-year conference, which was actually postponed to early 2025. This type of claim gets shared-playbook alarm bells ringing, as Balogová has testified from Slovakia. Even prior to the Slovak president’s attack on public broadcasters “the Orbán inspiration was clear for the first time when Fico created his own anti-Soros narrative, arguing that Soros was paying the protesters and us”, she said. “He’s been using the Orbán playbook ever since.”

The use of the negative enemy-building formula cuts across all far right propaganda and is the backbone of all its rhetoric. Speeches by Meloni – since she has been prime minister and thus in power – based entirely on opposition to what she labels the ‘left’, and defining herself a victim of, with a view to constant enemy-building, are too numerous to count. “There was a sort of cordon sanitaire around anyone not on the left, a *conventio ad excludendum*,” she said in her 2024 Atreju speech, for example.

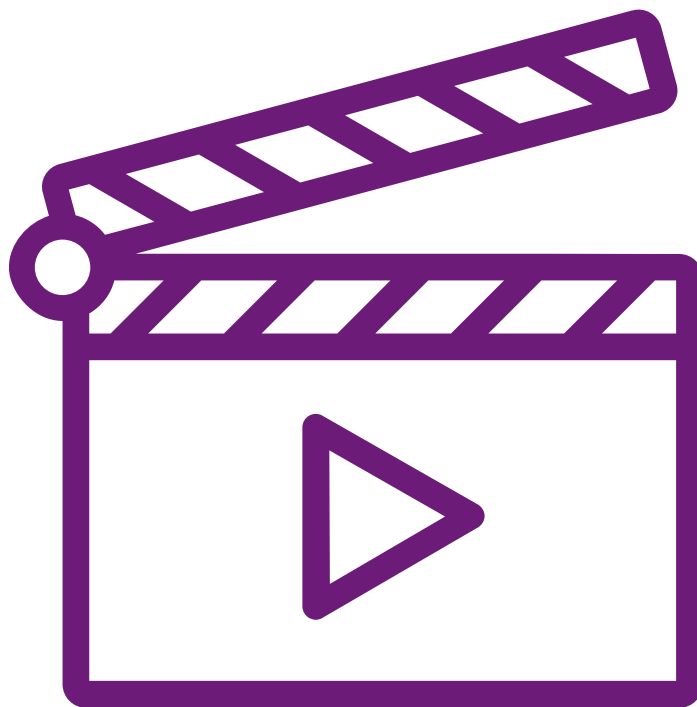
“But we, dear friends on the left, will never be like you. We’re proud to be the antithesis of you. We’re here to prove you wrong, to shock you.”

In this December 2024 speech alone, the word ‘left’ was used 13 times: ‘the left’, ‘the global left’, ‘the Brussels left’. If the arguments of the Orbán milieu at conferences all over Europe, including Rome, are to be believed – with Balázs Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister’s political manager a prime example – the left would be on the rise

in election and polls while it is actually the right which is more successful than ever.

Enemy building is much more than simply identifying individuals to direct one's populist rhetoric at on the grounds of their economic and political power or their use as elite fetishes. Neither is a matter of political opposition alone. The point is that the illiberal mechanism also targets minorities and attempts to break society up

into its identity components. The use and abuse of homophobic, anti-immigrant and abortion rights propaganda and attacks on an increasingly wide spectrum of rights, more generally, exemplifies this process. The rhetorical apparatus far-right groups share is used as a mechanism by which to hijack the frustrations of the electorate, and more generally, of society as a whole, against the serried ranks of artificially constructed targets: the Finkelstein formula taken to the extreme.



4. Everyone against everyone

Anti-immigrant propaganda illustrates the way illiberal world views have made their way into the political, social and public debate by repeating the same themes over and over again. In 2025, a decade on from what is now known in Europe as ‘the refugee crisis’ and nine years on from Orbán’s anti-immigrant referendum in Hungary, the asylum and rights themes – the “*Wir schaffen das*” or “we can do it” view uttered by the then Chancellor Angela Merkel – has been completely turned on its head. In Germany, in the wake of a surge in the popularity of AfD, the German Christian Democrats have gone to the extent of voting for an anti-immigration motion together with the far right. In France, the Emmanuel Macron moderates espoused the 2024 *loi pour contrôler l’immigration* which Marine Le Pen astutely presented as an “ideological victory”. And beyond the nation state level, the ‘melonisation’ of the European Commission has meant that President Ursula von der Leyen frequently takes part in the pre-Council of Europe discussions promoted by Meloni, together with the Danish prime minister, to push Brussels into agreeing ‘innovative solutions’ which translate into outsourcing operations such as the Albania model which violate human rights. The EU budget proposal put forward by the Commission in July 2025 for the 2028–2034 seven-year period set aside billions of euros for national border-consolidation plans to the joy of those – from Meloni to Polish prime minister Donald Tusk – who have made it a key consensus issue. The Schengen system is now so full of holes as to be virtually unusable and taking back border controls is a byword even in Berlin.

And all this causes very little embarrassment. It is now the norm. It has been normalised. But it began years ago, when the words ‘wall’ or ‘pushback’ were the exclusive preserve of the sovereignist camp. In the EU the job finished by Meloni today – in her dialogues with von der Leyen – began with the incessant anti-immigrant rhetoric honed by Orbán. In October 2016, a referendum asked the people of Hungary:

“Do you want to allow the European Union to mandate the resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens to Hungary without the approval of the National Assembly?”

In 2015 fear of mass immigration – the arrival of thousands of refugees at the border – was used by Fidesz to pass a law which authorised the government to [declare a state of emergency](#). And this despite the fact that these large numbers never arrived.

As we will see, Hungary’s 2025 ban on pride marches and other such examples, often under the aegis of identity flags which apparently strike at the rights of a section of the population but actually trigger a more generalised attack on democracy.

And a playbook is made to be reused and this is what has happened. Polish ultra-conservatives replicated Orbán’s strategy both in the harshness of its anti-immigrant rhetoric – “Immigrants bring cholera and parasites” said PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński ten or so years ago – and in its use of identity-focused referendums as an electoral mobilisation tool.

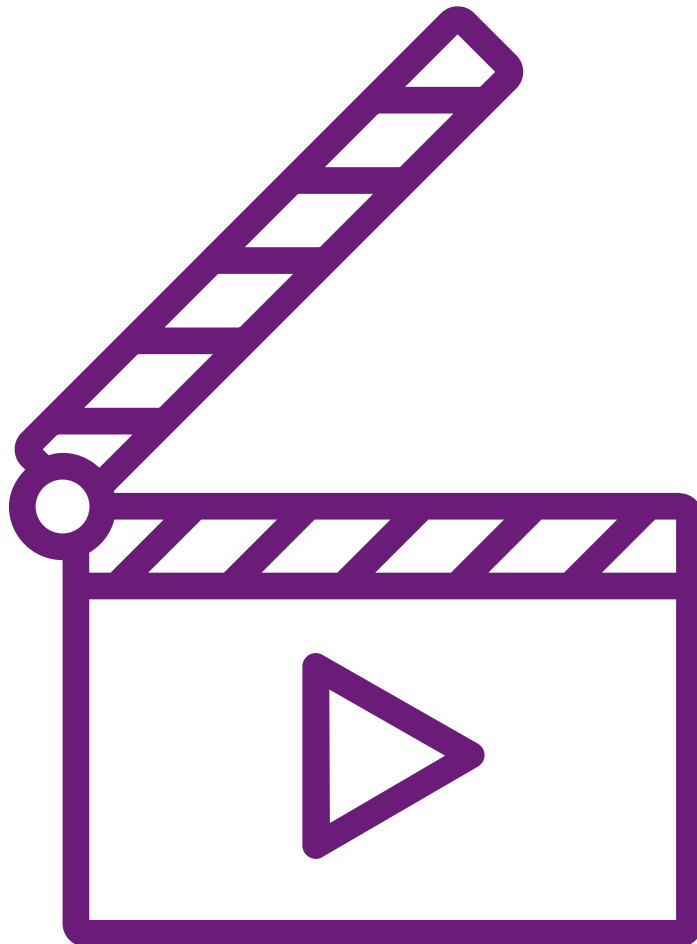
“Do you support the admission of thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, in accordance with the forced relocation mechanism imposed by the European bureaucracy?”

This was the key question, out of four which PiS put to the vote in October 2023, replicating the Orbán model in its entirety.

The anti-immigration referendum idea came from Hungary and it was once again in Orbán’s orbit that the use of the propaganda referendum was put to the test – one in which the referendum question is formulated in such a way as to embody the ideological assumptions of the party in power – holding it on the same day as the parliamentary elections. It is an idea which serves a multiplicity of purposes: polarising the electoral debate on identity themes, mobilising one’s own electorate and that attempted by parties even further to the right (in the case of the Polish neofascists of Konfederacja), i.e. trying to breakup a united opposition front (as happened in Poland in 2023 and Hungary the year before) by dividing it on the theme voted on.

The Hungarian prime minister attempted precisely this in the 2022 elections by holding an anti-LGBT referendum

on the same day as the 3rd April parliamentary elections. The referendum in question was actually more of an opinion poll than a referendum in the sense that it was not designed to change the law but to strengthen the 2021 anti-LGBT law. Winning referendums of this sort is a secondary priority for illiberal forces and, in fact, neither the Hungarian 2015 anti-immigration nor the 2022 anti-LGBT referendums achieved a quorum.



5.

An international-scale mechanism

Before we continue to explore these international scale human rights attacks, it is worth examining the co-ordination and exchange mechanisms at work. A plethora of think tanks and institutions linked to the far right works to keep relations between the various political movements alive. It is this which has enabled Fratelli d'Italia and PiS to keep up contacts at public events with the Hungarian government, including in 2022, when Orbán's views on Moscow were capable of causing embarrassment to a Giorgia Meloni on the rise and under the guise of Atlanticism.

The network in question also works on action plans, like the MCC and Ordo Iuris great EU reset plan. Ordo Iuris which is, in turn, part of the World Congress of Families, played a key role in both Poland's anti-LGBT crusade and the anti-abortion and pro-life battles. The PiS leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, admitted in 2016 that his abortion ban battle had been inspired by Ordo Iuris. But the linchpin of the system remains Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), a pro-Orbán soft power machine which has even obtained a Brussels headquarters, just a stone's throw away from the European institutions (and, in fact "occupy Brussels" was one of Orbán's rallying cries at the last European elections).

"It was we who helped the groups of farmers from the various European countries to network for their protests",

boasted Frank Furedi, the manager of the Brussels MCC office when I interviewed him in April 2024. "Culture war" is one of his most frequent rallying cries. MCC has existed as a private educational institution for decades but Orbán changed it radically and ensured it generous funding. Mathias Corvinus Collegium extended out into rural Hungary and even moved beyond national borders in 2022.

MCC's Budapest base is, first and foremost, a site of political connection. In the summer of 2021, while Fidesz – then without an EU political family – was dreaming of a union of the right with Matteo Salvini, Francesco Giubilei – founder of Nazione futura and the driving force between Meloni and Orbán orbit relations – was a visiting fellow at MCC Budapest. The French far right is also a frequent presence at MCC. In fact Nicolas Bay passed the night of the 2022 Hungarian elections here and Zemmour's inner clique spent time here when he was preparing for the presidential elections. And the Danube Institute plays a similar role. There are exponents of both the European and US far rights who feel very much at home in Budapest, and in these think tanks. In fact, writer Rod Dreher (also known for his time at *The American Conservative*) moved to the Hungarian capital and was made Director of the Network Project at the Danube Institute.

Across the Atlantic, the Heritage Foundation has finalised its Project 2025 which, behind its Presidential Transition Project facade plans to do what Orbán has done in Hungary on a larger scale: shaping the infrastructure of power in such a way as to keep it in Trump's hands.

"It is not enough to win elections. We have to put the right people in the right places",

says Heritage in its diatribe against "liberal politicians." Nazione Futura, a Meloni-milieu think tank, organises events together with the Heritage Foundation in Rome, while Budapest is already hosting the Conservative Political Action Conference, and, as of 2025, Poland will also have its own CPAC. This network links up capitals across Europe and with Washington, and includes enthusiastic Tucker Carlson voyages into Hungarian illiberalism.

6. Fighting the imagination

The illiberal training ground cuts across right wing movements of various origins: as we will see a common framework, a playbook, even links Hungarian control over cartoons considered 'queer' to the far right battles against Peppa Pig.

"Gender is a big problem for Europe": it was Orbán who said this to the international press on the occasion of the 2022 elections which gave him an even bigger parliamentary majority than he'd won at the previous elections. The international mobilisation witnessed in the Hungarian capital in June 2025, in response to 'gay pride', shone the spotlight on a tried and tested attack launched in synergy with other European formations.

It was pointed out to me in an interview that "[t]he Hungarian anti-LGBT law and Putin's 2013 law resemble one another" by Áron Demeter of Hungary's Amnesty. Even before an Orbán-esque law was visited on the Hungarian parliament in 2021, this thread leads us to Poland, where PiS – bound to Orbán by a dense network of political relationships and to Meloni by their shared membership of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) – acted as a forerunner. "LGBT-free zones" – areas "liberated from LGBT ideology" – were already commonplace in the south-east of Poland in 2019. The following year the presidential candidate supported by PiS, Andrej Duda, organised an electoral campaign of unprecedented homophobic ferocity and won a second term. The end of the electoral cycle in the summer of 2020 did not tone down this homophobic tirade and PiS – which also governed the country at this time – stepped up the repression, with an example being the arrests and harassment of those taking part in a Warsaw pro-LGBT march in August that year.

This attack on LGBT rights was used as a training ground for both division strategies aiming to fragment society and polarise debate with identity battles against minorities and for repression purposes. In fact the pride march ban was part of a package which encompassed limits on the right to assembly and the political abuse of face-recognition surveillance.

Let us now wind the thread back to the beginning. Despite polls not finding Hungarian society to be homophobic and LGBT activists describing it as having one of central Europe's most mature movements, this incessant illiberal barrage began with the advent of Orbán's shift to authoritarianism. As far back as 2011, Jozsef Szajer –

Fidesz's fourth member and a friend of the prime minister's since his time as a student in Oxford – contributed to the new version of the Constitution which omitted to recognise gay couples. And a decade later, this same Szajer – by now Fidesz's official liaison officer with the European Parliament – was caught at a gay orgy in Brussels. This is not the only case of Orbán's most fervently pro-traditional family propagandists tripping up. A further case in point is another of the prime minister's closest allies, Katalin Novák, ('traditional') Family Minister, liaison officer with the World Congress of Families and the backbone of relations with Lega exponents such as the current Italian Presidente della Camera Lorenzo Fontana. Novak chaired the Budapest Demographic Summit which brought Meloni to the stage as premier. Then, in February 2024 she had to stand down from her post as President of the Republic (a role she had held since 2022) after revelations emerged of her having given a presidential pardon to the deputy manager of the Bicske orphanage who had tried to cover up his child abuse by attempting to force children concerned to lie to the courts. This did not stop Meloni from inviting Novak to the Atlantic Council ceremony in September 2024. And the by-then former Hungarian president brought down by this child abuse scandal took selfies of her friendly meetings with Meloni and Elon Musk, under the catchphrase: "Only children can save the world."

Our thread takes us to Orbán's anti-LGBT law, an example of the way the illiberal mechanism works to distort the public debate, with the prime minister's party giving a law initially designed to increase the severity of child abuse sentences a homophobic twist. But in early June 2021 – prior to the final vote – Fidesz amended the text, adding bans on contents promoting homosexuality and changing the nature of the law.

Under the rallying cry of "defending children's rights" the law asserted a

"ban on making contents deviating from the sex assigned them at birth or which promote homosexuality available to children."

Teachers and educators were to abide by the principle enshrined in the law: only the heterosexual family had

the right to exist and “the father must be a man, the mother a woman.” The Hungarian anti-LGBT law? “We must copy it,” said the then Polish Minister of Education, Przemysław Czarnek, in July 2021, before going on to state that gays are certainly not normal, they are deviants.”

The new 2021 dispositions related not only to children’s sex education but also to contents which they might come across accidentally and the advertising market was thus also to comply with “traditional family” criteria. In 2022 this operation culminated in a surreal war on cartoons, which was in some way imported by the Italian far right, too, during its election campaign of that year. In September Fratelli d’Italia launched a crusade against the creators of the cartoon Peppa Pig, arguing that its

“decision to include a character with two mothers was unacceptable. We cannot accept this gender indoctrination and therefore ask the Rai, which buys the rights to the Peppa Pig series in Italy, not to broadcast this episode.”

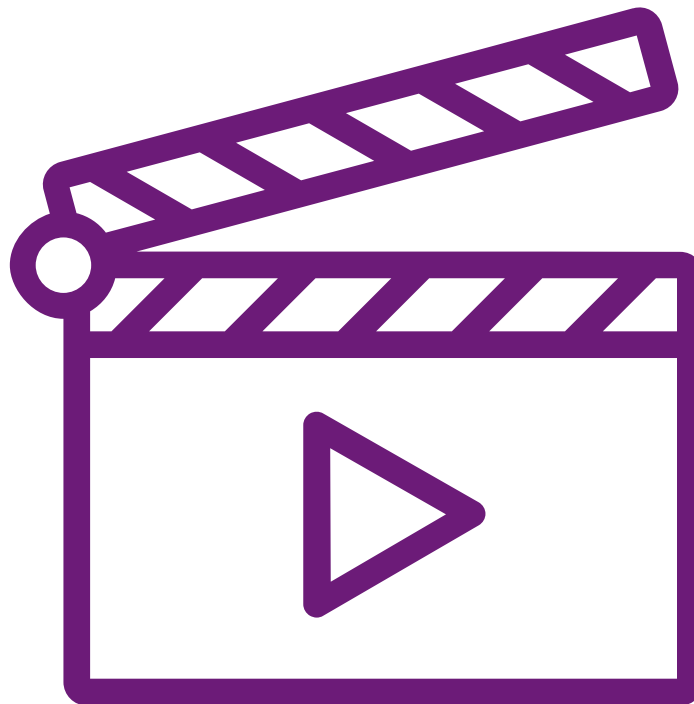
This was an imported controversy; this cartoon censorship had been launched precisely this month by the

Orbán system. The 2021 anti-LGBT law made reports on audiovisual contents to media authorities credible, and these potentially led to fines and content blocks. The regulatory authority was, in actual fact, a Fidesz organ and the same body which had withdrawn independent broadcasters’ licenses. Other reports – relating to books for example – could be made to police stations, organs of central power. Three months on from the law coming into force, over one hundred reports had been made to the authority, with cartoon characters being amongst those reported.

“Thirty years ago, when my children were watching Pumuckl the elf, who would ever have thought of looking into his trousers?”

a Hungarian social media user commented, while the opposition launched the slogan “Je suis Pumuckl”.

This cartoon witch hunt – a war against the imagination – shows just how pervasive the illiberal barrage is. But the underlying goal goes well beyond the covert censorship of cartoons. It relates to the repression of dissent more generally, as a widening out of the picture will show.



7. God, nation, family and control

The 2021 anti-LGBT law cast light on the tendency – still a feature of movements on the far right in their various forms – to use an illiberal playbook to strike at social bodies. It is, in fact, indirectly an anti-NGO law, as it bans bodies held not to fall into line with the Orbán ideology. To cite from the law, “NGOs with controversial orientations” must not be sex education providers.

This use and abuse of identity propaganda as a dissent-repression mechanism was even more glaring in 2025, a year after the new elections, when the Orbán regime was feeling under pressure from a former party acolyte, Peter Magyar, who had decided to break away from it and form his own party, Tisza, and whose popularity in the polls was overtaking that of Fidesz. Orbán’s radicalisation thus took the form of heightened repression and in February 2025 he announced a Pride ban the following month, with an amendment designed to ban meetings which

“promote and exhibit deviations from gender identity corresponding to birth sex, gender reassignment and homosexuality”

with fines for those breaking the ban. The Constitution was changed, too, on the basis of the party’s large parliamentary majority, according “children’s right to suitable development” precedence over all other rights. Fidesz thus slipped a bomb into the debate capable of jeopardising the right to assembly which, together with the use of face-recognition surveillance to identify those breaking the rules, showed the true nature and goals of these various mechanisms – the introduction of a powerful repression mechanism.

The effectiveness of this illiberal barrage is founded on its step by step nature. In the case of Hungary it is especially clear that that the Orbán system has availed itself over the years of mechanisms which can then be activated at a later stage. The Pride ban was based on an earlier anti-LGBT law and used traditional family rhetoric to bring in dissent control by the back door.

Other key European sovereignist buzzwords such as ‘nation’, ‘sovereignty’ and ‘security’ can similarly be used for authoritarian purposes. There are many instances of this, and they range from Hungary to Italy.

In autumn 2022, when the Meloni government had only just been elected, and the very same days in which a crowd had gathered undisturbed in Predappio to celebrate Mussolini with a Fascist salute, a new anti-gathering law known as the ‘anti-rave’ law was drawn up. Not long afterwards, in 2025, Giorgia Meloni ‘proudly’ used emergency powers to approve – with a decree law procedure – a measure which had actually already existed as a draft law for over a year. Meloni argued that the measure “put words into practice against burglars” and that this was a

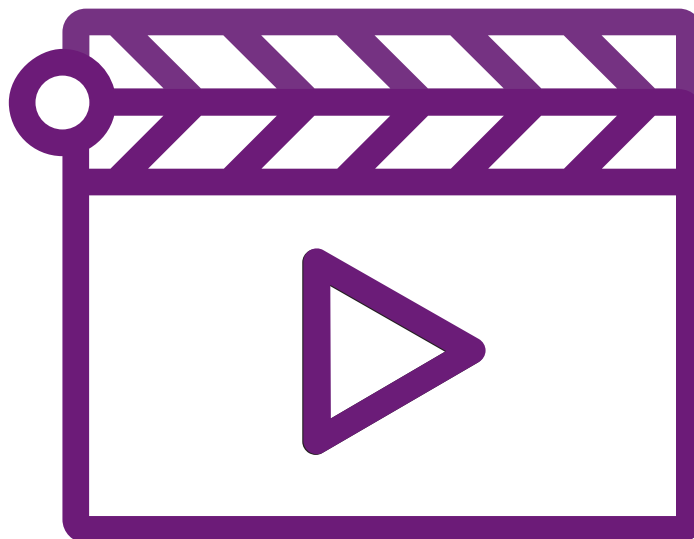
“law necessitated by commitments made to citizens and with those called on to defend our security on a daily basis.”

But the ‘security’ label was used by the governing majority as a cover for sections which are, at the very least, unsettling, such as the contents of article 31 which gives the secret services powers to infiltrate and perform surveillance on associations whose ends are terrorist or subversive. This is not a matter of defending police officers from criminal attacks or protecting the more vulnerable sections of the population, despite Meloni’s claims, but of protecting high-level intelligence bodies from the public eye and from punishment.

In Orbán’s Hungary, the word ‘sovereignty’ is one of the most frequently distorted to cover up dissent-repression mechanisms. In the spring of 2025 Hungary’s parliament drew up a draft law known as the ‘transparency in public life’ law which was soon stigmatised by critics as a ‘Russia law’, on the grounds that it used the ‘foreign agent’ argument to repress dissent. In addition to banning political and social bodies, including the press, from receiving foreign funding (including Hungarians with dual citizenship) without authorisation, it also handed over investigations into, and lists of, such cases to a Sovereignty Protection Office to be presided over by a prime ministerial appointee (and one of his allies). The ‘sovereignty threat’ is defined by this body in terms of whether or not individuals and bodies abide by certain of the principles enshrined in the Orbán Constitution, such as those in which Hungary is referred to as democratic or its heterosexual family basis.

Respect for 'sovereignty' effectively coincides with allegiance to Orbán's propaganda, with the non-aligned ending up blacklisted, at risk of having their bank accounts frozen and having to close down. The reaction of the free press and international bodies blocked the law's approval, which was originally scheduled for the summer, but the overall framework of the draft law has remained in place because the controversial 2023 'sovereignty law', on which the 'Russia law' is based, remains. As does the insidious use of this Orbán office. Stefano Bottoni, author of a biography critical of Orbán, has noted that the regime's new development

“lies precisely in the fact of creating a pseudo-legal framework by means of the Sovereignty Protection office which enables the government to obstruct a wide range of organisations, including Tisza using administrative methods – without the judiciary being involved.”



8.

Democracy under pressure

“If we are able to form a government in Germany, we will follow the Hungarian model step by step”, said AfD’s leader Alice Weidel in a press conference in Budapest in February 2025, while standing next to Orbán. The ‘Hungarian model’ is, to all intents and purposes, a system of autocratic social, economic and political controls. And it is also a playbook, an action plan, a range of tactics and strategies which illiberal movements try out and exchange. It encompasses a set of common themes which are full blown calls for action: anti-Brussels establishment, anti-immigration, anti-abortion and anti-LGBT rhetoric and so on; a rhetorical apparatus which diverts social and electoral frustrations onto a plethora of targets constructed insistently and artificially. It is state-of-the-art Finkelstein formula.

The true purpose of this identity-based social deconstruction, the obsession with ‘culture war’ (one of the catchphrases most insistently used by MCC Brussels’ Fűredi) and the right’s belief in the ability “to make use of Gramsci’s cultural hegemony concept” (once again Fűredi’s words) is to hijack the drive for change and the conflict dialectic against certain fixed targets. Targets which are identity rather than social emancipation based. The Hungarian prime minister benefited from the tolerance of the former German chancellor Angela Merkel in the name of the car manufacturing companies gifted an overtime time law known as the ‘slave law’. As a turbo-liberal leader, Weidel’s priorities do not include reducing inequalities. Meloni has coined a “let’s not interfere with manufacturers” motto taken up by von der Leyen on the Europe scale to justify the current deregulation. Their use of the illiberal barrage does not mean that these leaders and parties cannot or do not want dialogue with the economic and political powers, from the starting point of the European People’s Party family. Quite the opposite. Orbán was a member of the PPE until 2021, after which Fratelli d’Italia took over the centre-right and far right liaison role.

The normalisation of the far right and the illiberal discourse is also the outcome of certain specific policies and strategies. The role of the leader of the PPE, Manfred Weber, in this should also be cited. Since 2021 Weber has helped to bring the far right into the EU fold. In exchange for a boycott on plans for a single large far right group, Weber joined a tactical alliance with Fratelli d’Italia which culminated in the European Conservatives obtaining vice-presidency of the European Parliament in January 2022 and a vice-presidency of the European Commission in 2026. The communication channel between Weber and FDL has also set in motion a season of co-operation between Meloni and von der Leyen and opened the way for ‘variable majorities’. Even in the previous legislature, with certain Green votes, and to an even greater extent during the current European Parliament legislature, the PPE has voted more than once with the far right, including the AfD, for example on the immigration theme.

In the meantime, Trump’s return to the White House and direct action by the ultra-rich ‘broligarchy’ in political dynamics is currently supercharging the illiberal playbook. The erosion of the rule of law currently under way in the EU is turning into a global level attack on democratic equilibria. Attacks by the leaders of the Polish, Hungarian and Italian far right on the judiciary and its independence may have been under way for some time, but Trump is magnifying this beyond measure. Attacks on immigrants’ rights may have been under way in the EU for some time, but the US has moved onto the use of force. We may have been getting used to ‘full powers’ being invoked here in Europe, but in Washington use of these has been fully under way for some time now. We may have got used to the various Brexit and Polexit calls to arms, but the US president and vice president are now launching full frontal attacks on the EU and its rules. If this is the new normal, any one with a memory will recall that there is nothing normal about it: democracy is under threat after years and years of incessant illiberal attacks.

About the author

Francesca De Benedetti is Europe section head of the *Domani* newspaper. In the past she has worked for *Repubblica* and *La7*. In 2024 she was appointed fellow at the Vienna Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM) where she won the Milena Jesenská Fellowship for Journalists with a project entitled *Giorgia Meloni and Viktor Orbán: An Asymmetric Interdependence*. De Benedetti writes European politics commentaries and analysis for *Vanity Fair Italia* and *Jacobin USA*. Her articles and opinions have been published in a range of international newspapers such as *The Independent*, *Balkan Insight*, *Die Presse* and *HVG*. She co-founded *European Focus*, a European-scale joint editorial project created by nine press outlets including *Domani*, *Tagesspiegel*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Libération* and *El Confidencial*.

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The illiberal playbook

Europe's far right and illiberal movements have infiltrated the public debate on the basis of a European political and social disruption agenda. The illiberal playbook shared by Orbán and Meloni is founded on enemy-building and reinforced by the international sharing of tactics.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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