
HUNGARY

Politicizing war: Viktor Orbán's right-wing authoritarian populist regime and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Soon after Viktor Orbán returned to power in 2010, Vladimir Putin's Russia became a strategic ally for Hungary. This was a somewhat surprising development for a country with a history of mass movements for political freedom crushed with the assistance of Russian troops. Yet, unlike virtually all his European allies on the radical and populist Right, Orbán has supported Putin even during his campaign against Ukraine. As this has not been without political and economic costs for Hungary, the question emerges as to why Orbán has been so loyal to Putin. The report presents three complementary explanations: (1) the traditional animosity Hungarian governments have shown toward Kyiv in the past three decades; (2) blaming the European Union and the pro-Ukraine Western alliance for economic hardship in Hungary; (3) endorsing Putin's totalitarian turn in Russia to suggest that a similar course of political developments in Hungary is not excluded either. Worryingly, considerable institutional measures in the latter direction in the form of states of danger, continuously implemented since March 2020, have already been taken.

Keywords: *Hungary, Ukraine, Viktor Orbán, authoritarian populism, autocratization, macroeconomic conditions*

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Context

At the time of writing (Spring 2023), Hungary has been under populist rule for 13 years, the longest of any European Union (EU) country. Soon after Viktor Orbán's right-wing populist Fidesz party returned to power in 2010, Vladimir Putin's Russia became a strategic ally for Hungary. Having played the sovereigntists card against Brussels and "the West" since the early 2010s, Orbán and his domestic allies have increasingly relied on China, Russia, and other autocratic regimes, such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkey, as sources of alternative economic and political support. For Orbán and Fidesz, this has been a rational political strategy, at least to some extent. They have sought to increase their room for political and economic manoeuvre concerning the EU, the IMF and the global financial markets, on which Hungary has long been dependent.

This political project has been contentious from the start. After all, Hungary — particularly the Hungarian Right — have long viewed Russia as an oppressive regional power and positioned themselves in opposition to Moscow. In 1848–49, Russian troops helped the Austrians put down a Hungarian uprising against Habsburg rule, ending hopes of an independent Magyar state. And while the Red Army liberated Hungary from the Far Right Arrow Cross regime under Nazi occupation during the Second World War, the Soviets troops did not withdraw, backing a local communist dictatorship against the wishes of the majority. Then, in 1956, Soviet troops intervened again when Hungarians took to the streets to champion freedom and independence. This historical litany has reinforced the notion that Russia (or the Soviet Union) was an irredeemably imperialist power intent on suppressing freedom in Central and Eastern Europe. With this historical context in mind, Orbán's sympathy for Putin's increasingly autocratic and oppressive regime since 2010 has been a somewhat surprising development.

Having said that, Orbán and Fidesz are certainly not the only pro-Russian populist voices on the European continent. From Alexis Tsipras in Greece and Marine Le Pen in France to Matteo Salvini in Italy and Donald Trump in the United States, a growing number of left- and right-wing populist leaders adopted pro-Russian views in the 2010s. Although the precise reasons for this are unclear (and may well include direct financial incentives), they most probably include admiration for power and the ability to rule without institutional constraints. In the Hungarian case, Fidesz has been joined by Jobbik, another Radical Right party established in 2003, in communicating positive sentiments towards Putin's Russia.

Jobbik was also probably financially supported by Moscow.[1]

When Orbán's Fidesz was in opposition from 2002 to 2010, the party criticized Hungary's succession of Socialist–Liberal governing coalitions for cultivating overly cordial relations with Moscow at the cost of Hungary's Western orientation. In opposition, Fidesz was an active member of the conservative European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament and cherished partnerships with right-wing parties abroad. Yet at the same time, Fidesz relentlessly played the sovereigntist card in domestic politics, something Orbán honed to a fine art, blaming Hungary's government for "selling out" to Western interests before 2010. Fidesz also toyed with Eurosceptic rhetoric, and for some time, it was unclear whether or not Orbán genuinely backed Hungary's EU accession in 2004.

Hence, by the time Fidesz and Orbán won a landslide victory in 2010 that handed them the two-thirds parliamentary majority needed to amend the constitution, the ideological profile of Fidesz had become a mix of pro-EU Christian democratic, conservative, and Eurosceptic–sovereigntist views. After 2010, Orbán and his party moved progressively toward the European Radical Right, forging ties with Le Pen's Front National, Salvini's Lega and the Austrian Freedom Party. Today, Fidesz's most important regional ally is PiS, the Polish governing party.

After a long, contentious, and drawn-out battle, Fidesz was finally expelled from EPP in 2021, and since then, Orbán has cemented his position as a senior Radical Right leader in the EU. And although none of his allies on the Radical Right—including Le Pen and Salvini—has been willing to openly support the Putin regime after February 2022, Orbán has doggedly maintained a pro-Russian stance. So the question arises as to what explains Orbán's bold exceptionalism, which has inevitably alienated him (and his government) from his closest European allies, including, for example, PiS.

1. See, for instance, Seres (2017).

Authoritarian populism as political strategy

Orbán's deviant geopolitical stance within the EU is undergirded by his rock-solid political base at home. This is not simply a result of his being exceptionally successful at preserving his power (Orbán is the longest-serving elected prime minister in Hungarian history, although two twentieth-century autocrats, Miklós Horthy and János Kádár, governed Hungary longer from other positions). Orbán can also rely on an exceptionally centralized, stable, and exclusionary system of political institutions partly inherited from the system established after Hungary's transition to democracy in 1990 and partly developed by himself after 2010. This institutional architecture is organized around a government that the prime minister personally controls. The two-thirds majority Fidesz maintains in Hungary's unicameral parliament has allowed it to pass constitutional amendments unconstrained and to stack the state institutions with party loyalists. The entire system of political institutions is vertically organized such that Orbán can orchestrate it in a top-down fashion. And Orbán has no viable competition either in Fidesz or in the opposition.

The opposition consists of a cluster of smaller, independent (and often ideologically opposed) parties, which unsuccessfully attempted to replace Fidesz in the 2022 elections by creating a joint electoral list and joint prime ministerial candidate. The extensive intra-party coordination that this required simply disintegrated after the failure to unseat Fidesz at the polls. It is unclear whether a similar joint opposition list and prime ministerial candidate will be created at the next elections. Currently, seven relatively small opposition parties are represented in parliament.[2] Most are politically ineffective and seen as increasingly redundant by the public.[3]

The difficulties of the opposition are exacerbated by the electoral system. Its underlying nature is majoritarian, as most parliamentary seats are gained in single-mandate constituencies (SMCs) through single-round, first-past-the-post elections. Winning a majority of these seats requires considerable financial and organizational resources at the national level that only large parties can hope to muster. However, smaller parties can enter parliament through party lists that provide proportional

2. The largest opposition party, centre left Demokratikus Koalíció (DK), currently has 15 seats (7.5%) in the 199-member Parliament.
3. For opinion polls on party preferences, see: https://kozvelemenykutatok.hu/.

representation in a minority of parliamentary seats. Such an electoral system creates multiple equilibria for political parties: winning elections requires pooling large amounts of resources (high-level equilibrium), but having relatively few resources can also provide a viable entry into parliament without an effective chance of taking over the government (low-level equilibrium). As voters know this, they prefer to vote for parties seeking the high-level equilibrium, although few such parties are on offer on the opposition side.

This political-institutional architecture fits very well with authoritarian populism as a political strategy.[4] Reproducing the two-thirds parliamentary majority every four years through a customized electoral system, Orbán and his allies have gained popular legitimacy by using complete institutional control over Hungary's political and economic resources to channel rewards in a clientelist manner. The wealthiest person in Hungary is a childhood friend of the prime minister, and all nationally important officeholders are his confidants. Actions of the governing coalition[5] are endorsed by a pliant mass media that is partly public and partly private. The bulk of this private media is controlled by government-friendly businesses, including the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), a syndicate into which Fidesz-friendly private media entrepreneurs "voluntarily" transferred their media outlets in 2018.

Authoritarian populism as a political strategy is characterized by contesting competitive but unfair elections under highly skewed conditions (Ádám, 2018; Weyland, 2021). Waging these electoral battles, authoritarian populists typically employ exclusionary ideologies often associated with nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia, as well as anti-elitism in one form or another. Where authoritarian populists have been in power for some time (as in Hungary and Poland), anti-elitism is often oriented against powerful external political or economic actors, such as the EU, the IMF, the United States, or the global financial

4. Populism as a political strategy as opposed to political discourse or ideology is classically conceptualized by Weyland (2001, p. 14): "populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers."
5. Formally, the two-third majority of parliament is held by a coalition of two parties: Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). The latter, however, is a satellite party of the former: it does not have separate party lists at elections and nor does it represent any separate political alternative to Fidesz on its own right. However, in contrast to Fidesz, KDNP has remained a member party of EPP after Fidesz' expulsion in 2021 and is still represented in the European Parliament's EPP group by one MEP.

industry and especially one of its most active representatives, the Hungarian-born George Soros. Anti-elite rhetoric against all these actors is a Fidesz mainstay as it exploits fierce ingroup-outgroup dynamics in Hungary, which the party itself has largely cultivated for this very purpose. In this context, any salient political cleavage the government can establish to distinguish Hungary's friends from its enemies is a powerful political tool. Such cleavages perpetually restructure the political space, and as the sole actor controlling the restructuring process in the media, Fidesz is able to reinforce its institutionally unlimited power symbolically.[6]

However, waging an actual war is a qualitatively different political strategy than employing a strategy of perpetual cleavage creation in ideological space. War can be, of course, also conceptualized as a cleavage, but its human and political consequences reach much further. In war (or in a war-type situation such as "special operations"), governments request unconditional cooperation from citizens justified by the need to defend the interests of the entire national community. Hence, war serves as an effective handmaiden for introducing totalitarian rule. However, once government power has become totalitarian, authoritarian populism ceases to exist and is replaced by outright dictatorship. Such a process started in Russia with the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and culminated in the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By maintaining its alliance with Russia, the Orbán regime has endorsed Russia's totalitarian turn as a legitimate course of action. In addition, by introducing and maintaining a legal state of danger, the administration has created extraordinary government powers in response to the war in Ukraine and presented a strategy of introducing openly autocratic rule to replace authoritarian populism.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine: A new turning point for the Orbán regime?

The year 2022: Elections and other challenges for the regime

In early 2022, Orbán and his lieutenants were preparing for yet another electoral battle, this time with a unified (and thus potentially more effective) opposition challenge than before. Economic difficulties, partly related to the COVID-19 crisis and Hungary's exclusion from post-pandemic European development financing,

6. For further discussions on the interplay between exercising symbolic and 'actual' power – i.e., the way the effective power monopoly of Fidesz is symbolically reinforced –, see Bohle (2018), Kim (2018), and Sebők & Simons (2022).

saw the government's electoral position deteriorate. Half a year before the April 2022 parliamentary elections, the united opposition was on par with Fidesz in opinion polls. The regime responded to the challenge using its usual arsenal, but this time went even further than before in providing economic incentives for the pro-government vote: aggressive anti-opposition discourse in mass propaganda, broad-based tax reductions, and pension hikes (Ádám & Csaba, 2022). And then came the Russian invasion of Ukraine five weeks before Hungary's April 3 elections.

The invasion fundamentally changed the political trajectory of the Orbán regime. Right from the beginning, the regime clearly sided with Russia and aligned its messaging with pro-Russian propaganda. Why did they do so? The *reasons* are not immediately clear, as a pro-Russian position carries substantial political costs for the regime. But the *results* are all too apparent. Orbán and his allies have found themselves increasingly isolated in the EU and, perhaps even more importantly, also within the group of Central and Eastern European member states. Hungary became a near pariah in the West after siding with the oppressor of the East, betraying all values – and interests – of humanity, freedom, and democracy.

Isolation and international humiliation have seen Hungary's economic position deteriorate as well. A large part of Hungary's EU development financing as part of the so-called Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has been suspended and is now dependent on Hungary implementing anti-corruption measures (an unprecedented decision in EU history). At the same time, the Hungarian forint weakened on currency markets, inflation soared (and became the highest in the EU by the turn of 2022/23), the refinancing costs of Hungarian public debt increased, and Hungarian credit ratings were downgraded. Without firm EU backing, Hungary has become the member state most vulnerable to the global economic crisis, triggered by ultra-expansionary fiscal and monetary policies globally, the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, and the effects of the current war.

As a communication strategy, the government has been trying to shift the blame for all economic difficulties to the EU, claiming that the sanctions against Russia are responsible for high inflation, volatile markets and weak output. Orbán has resorted to his go-to strategy of orchestrating a so-called "National Consultation" (essentially, a direct marketing campaign posted out to Hungarian households seeking their opinions on highly manipulative questions) backed by government-sponsored mass advertising campaigns claiming Brussels is "bombarding" peaceful countries. The government proudly reported that 97% of respondents (which, in

the particular case, meant 1.4 million people in a country of about 8 million eligible voters) returned their postal surveys agreeing with the government's position of criticising EU economic sanctions on Russia.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine also played a role in reinforcing Fidesz's dominant political position in the electoral campaign. The Fidesz strategy portrayed the united democratic opposition as a pro-Ukraine camp that would drag Hungary into war with Russia. Of course, no opposition candidate suggested that Hungary should enter the war, but some of them, including the joint prime ministerial candidate, Péter Márki-Zay, voiced the view that Hungary should be part of the Western alliance supporting Ukraine. Yet, this was more than enough for the Fidesz propaganda machine to portray them as war hawks endangering the peace and integrity of Hungary. Public opinion data suggest that the government communication strategy was successful: the majority of the electorate, even most of those with pro-opposition and anti-Orbán views, internalized the government-stirred anxiety about the war and wanted to see Hungary remaining neutral and distancing itself from the conflict.

Although opinion polling on wars is notoriously unreliable because polling data itself becomes part of disinformation campaigns, it seems that Hungary has indeed become an outlier in terms of pro-Russian views and reservations about the rectitude and rationality of Western political and military support for Ukraine. In June-July 2022, the Prague-based Free Press for Eastern Europe surveyed internet users' views on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in six Central and East European (CEE) member states of the EU: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.[7] This was cited in the Hungarian press, including the leading Hungarian opposition website Telex, whose English-language edition observed, "46% of Hungarian internet users were moderately pro-Russian, 31% strongly pro-Russian, 8% completely pro-Russian and only 15% pro-Ukrainian" (Aradi & Horváth Kávai, 2022). In another online publication that covered the survey in November 2022, Átlátszó, it was revealed that according to 36% of Hungarian respondents, Ukraine should have surrendered to Russia, the highest

7. According to their website, "Free Press for Eastern Europe (FPEE) is a non-for-profit organisation registered in Prague, Czech Republic, in April 2016. It is supported by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs Transition Promotion Program. Our mission is to support independent media and journalism in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond" (https://www.fpee.info/about).

ratio in the six countries surveyed. The corresponding ratios in the other five CEE countries were between 8% (Poland) and 32% (Bulgaria).

Meanwhile, 34% of Hungarian respondents said the EU should not intervene in the war. The corresponding ratios in the other five CEE countries were between 2% (Poland) and 28% (Bulgaria) (Pete, 2022). Although these figures look broadly reasonable, the survey was conducted online, and information on it is not available on the FPEE website. (Átlátszó presumably covered the survey in November because its coverage was linked to the November 15 conference of FPEE. According to the FPEE website, the conference took place, but little further information on its content is provided.)

Another relevant public opinion survey was conducted by the pro-government think-tank Századvég which published opinion data in October 2022. In this, Századvég proudly proclaims that

> nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Hungarians believe that the United States of America and Joe Biden are more in favour of continuing the Russian-Ukraine way, which is likely related to the fact that the actions and statements of the US president do not contribute to the promotion of peace deal but to the further escalation of the conflict. (Századvég, 2022)

Századvég, like most pro-government think tanks, pseudo-autonomous civil society organizations and media outlets, engages in notoriously one-sided political discussions to endorse government views. In this context, public opinion data serves explicit political interests. Yet, what they stress and how they formulate arguments provide accurate information on the structure of government propaganda in terms of which arguments are supposed to resonate most with the sentiments of the pro-government electorate.

An (un)easy alliance: Explanations for siding with the aggressor

Why do Orbán and his domestic followers side so resolutely with Putin? There appear to be three roughly equally important explanatory factors. First, Orbán and his friends believe that Hungary is not interested in taking sides in the war. They consider Russian dominance over an institutionally weak Ukraine to be better from a Hungarian point of view than a strategically reinforced, militarily strong Ukraine. In the past three decades, most Hungarian governments have had a degree of animosity towards Ukraine as most Kyiv governments were not particularly

respectful of Hungarian minority rights in Transcarpatia. At an early stage of the invasion, some might have even assumed that Hungary had territorial claims against Ukraine when the Russian government was seen to be signalling potential support for such Hungarian ambitions. This was, however, unlikely to become actual Hungarian government policy unless Ukraine completely disintegrated as a consequence of the war.

Secondly, by siding with Putin and against the EU and the entire Western alliance, Orbán can tactically remain on the offensive, blaming EU sanctions and Western policies for sustaining Ukrainian self-defence in an armed conflict, ostensibly imposing economic costs on the entire region. This is particularly advantageous for Orbán at a time of increasing economic hardship on the home front. Blaming the EU and the Western alliance backing Ukraine can reorient some of the Hungarian population's disenchantment toward "Brussels". A recurring argument in this context, often endorsed by opinion leaders in the anti-capitalist Radical Left is that supporting Ukraine and extending the borders of NATO to the east serves Western economic and strategic interests and the 'real stake' of the war is not Ukrainian (or European) freedom but rather who dominates global capitalism: the United States and its Western allies, or China, Russia, and other emerging economies?

Such an "anti-war" or "pacifist" left-wing disposition is, of course, a usual stance internationally, often appearing at the fringes of the mainstream centre-left, primarily in Western Europe. One example in the Hungarian context is Antal (2023), who presents this disposition in the Hungarian case and criticizes both the "pro-war", "militaristic" opposition that adopts the West's pro-Ukraine views uncritically and the government position endorsing Russian imperialism. A meaningful left-wing political response to the war in Ukraine, Antal claims, should create political space between these "two extremes", but he fails to explain how "anti-war pacificism" should take on an actual war machine in operation in Ukraine. Hence, in effect, his argumentation reinforces the government's allegedly "pro-peace" position to the war.

Thirdly and perhaps most worryingly, Orbán's pro-Russian stance can be interpreted in a way that Orbán uses Putin's regime as an implicit reference for totalitarian power, as a kind of proxy for his own potentially implemented outright autocracy. Putin decided to escalate the low-profile armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine that had started in 2014 with the Russian annexation of Crimea into

an open invasion against Kyiv in February 2022. Military experts agree that the Russians made several strategic mistakes at the beginning of the war, mainly by underestimating the strength of Ukrainian resistance. However, Putin's most important aim might not have been overthrowing Volodymyr Zelenskyy's pro-EU government and making Ukraine a Russian vassal state but reinforcing his grip on power back home.

Before the war, Putin had a semi-institutionalized domestic opposition. He attempted to kill (and subsequently jailed) his strongest political opponent, Alexei Navalny, whose organization was able to mobilize tens of thousands of people across Russia in anti-regime demonstrations amidst a generally declining economic situation and growing isolation from the West that has increasingly alienated the middle classes from the regime.[8] However, the assault on Ukraine started a new chapter in Russian history. War means totalitarian rule. No institutionalized opposition operates during war. Everybody is subordinated to the government that rules in martial law-like conditions.

Putin, of course, has provided powerful economic incentives for like-minded political groups and regimes worldwide in the past two decades for being his allies, and the Orbán regime was no exception. Relatively cheap Russian oil and gas and the multi-billion-euro extension of the Paks nuclear power station were the most critical goods Orbán traded with Putin, which he used economically and politically. Putin became a regular guest in Budapest in the 2010s, and Orbán grew to be his most reliable ally in the EU, extending their friendship to the post-February 2022 period. However, the most important reason that Putin and his regime became popular among the worshippers of Orbán (just as he did among the worshippers of Trump in the United States) is not the economic benefits Russia had been able to provide for its allies until anti-Russian sanctions were switched into full gear by the EU. Instead, it is the cult of total power that Putin and his regime exercise.

There are important parallels in domestic political conditions for Orbán to those of Putin, albeit in a different international context and at a considerably higher level of democratization. Economic conditions have been deteriorating in past years

8. Putin's approval rate in December 2021 according to the Moscow-based Levada Center (https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/) was 65%, as high as in January 2014, a month before Russia's annexation of Crimea (His disapproval rates were 34% in both periods). Starting an armed conflict saw his approval rates jump above 80% (and lowered his disapproval rate to under 20%).

(Ádám & Csaba, 2022), and Hungary faces a grim outlook with negligible (or outright negative) economic growth in 2023. Annual average inflation is forecast to stay above 15%, real wages to fall, and the rising refinancing costs of public debt are likely to force budgetary cuts.[9] Meanwhile, due to political radicalization and growing international isolation, important middle-class groups have started to distance themselves electorally from the government in past years. The Fidesz electorate has become increasingly rural and lower educated.

At the October 2019 municipal elections, most urban areas (cities of several tens of thousands of inhabitants and more, Budapest districts, and Budapest as a whole) were electorally dominated by candidates of the united opposition. At the April 2022 parliamentary elections, the united opposition won all but one of the 18 SMCs in Budapest. This was the first time since the foundation of parliamentary democracy in 1990 that the SMCs in the richest Buda parts of the city — the country's most affluent and educated — were not carried by the dominant right-wing party. According to an April 2022 poll by Median, a leading independent public opinion polling agency, the level of education was the most important determinant of electoral choice: the lower educated were more inclined to vote for Fidesz across types of settlements. As better-educated voters typically inhabited more urbanized areas, they tended to vote less for Fidesz (Median, 2022).

Importantly, the mechanism the lower educated are typically affiliated to Fidesz is rather economic than ideological: having survived the 2008–10 economic crisis under center-left governance, a large part of the lower-middle and working classes learnt that they were better off under a right-wing administration (Róna et al., 2020). Hence, deteriorating economic conditions – the most serious economic challenge for the Orbán regime since its inception in 2010 – threatened the gradual alienation of relatively poorer, lesser-educated, rural parts of the electorate, on which Fidesz has become increasingly dependent in past years. This is the conundrum Orbán needs to solve, and one apparent political solution is growing autocratization.

Putin's aggression, in fact, was not only ideologically approved by Orbán, but his regime has used it as an opportunity for further institutionalizing autocracy.

9. In its November 2022 economic outlook for Hungary, the European Commission forecast 0.1% economic growth and 15.7% average annual inflation for 2023 (https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-economies/hungary/economic-forecast-hungary_en).

Importantly, Hungary has been governed by special legal regimes called "states of danger" since March 2020, when the first was introduced due to COVID-19, enabling the government to overrule acts of parliament and replace them with government decrees. The state of danger has also constrained the economic powers of local municipalities and some of the citizens' basic freedoms, including the freedom to assemble and free expression – back then as measures were taken against the pandemic (Ádám, 2020). In May 2022, the state of danger due to COVID-19 was terminated, but at the very same time, another state of danger due to an armed conflict in a neighbouring state was introduced.[10] Effectively, this implies that outright autocracy can be introduced whenever Orbán decides so.

Conclusion

This chapter tried to shed light on the dynamics of political exposure to the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the Orbán regime. First, I explained why it was a surprising political move by Orbán to side with Putin already well before the invasion, since the early 2010s. Secondly, I discussed authoritarian populism as a political strategy defining the Orbán regime and argued that it was incompatible with the totalitarian rule that autocratic governments exercise during open military conflict. In the first part of the third section, I presented the general conditions among which the regime operated in 2022, including the challenge of a united opposition at the April 2022 parliamentary elections and the deteriorating economic situation, exacerbated by the EU stance of withholding Hungarian development funding that the government could otherwise rely on as part of the RRF. These developments provide context for the situation in which the regime found itself during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The question is why Orbán has sided with Putin since the first moment of the war and has continued supporting the aggressor despite the considerable economic and political costs of international isolation.

My answer was threefold. First, I argued that Orbán and his allies believe that a Ukrainian victory in the war is no better for Hungary than reinforced Russian domination over Ukraine would be. Traditional animosity between Budapest and

10. In fact, the very same issue of the official bulletin *Magyar Közlöny* (85/2022) on May 24 contained government decrees repealing the state of danger due to COVID19 and introducing a new one in response to the armed conflict and humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine. On the dubious constitutionality of the second state of danger as a special legal regime, see Mészáros (2022).

Kyiv and the particular logic of regional power games may have been instrumental in formulating this policy stance in Budapest. Secondly, and probably more importantly, by siding with Russia, Orbán could stay on the offensive, appreciating the relative, short-term value of his consent to European and NATO policies and blaming the EU and the pro-Ukraine Western alliance for domestic economic difficulties. Thirdly and most worryingly, supporting Putin in the conflict meant the approval of his totalitarian turn at home. By endorsing the Russian invasion of Ukraine and blaming the EU and NATO for not letting Ukraine fall, Orbán politically suggests that he could take a similar totalitarian turn were authoritarian populism as a pseudo-democratic strategy for maintaining his rule to become untenable. He knows that what he claims about the distribution of responsibilities among Russia, Ukraine, and the West would not convince the majority of voters at fair elections and that pushing back against the EU at the cost of losing EU development funds and, potentially, access for other EU cooperation schemes[11] would not sell well politically. What Orbán does against these conditions is a bet on a disintegrating Western alliance behind Ukraine and a weakening EU that itself shifts to the Radical Right, giving room for further autocratization in Hungary, and the potential emergence of the EU's first outright autocracy. The fact that Hungarians have been living under special legal regimes called "states of danger", enabling practically unlimited government power since March 2020, underscores the feasibility of this alternative.

11. In December 2022, the Council of the EU requested the exclusion of most Hungarian universities from the EU's Erasmus student and lecturer exchange program as well as from HorizonEurope research cooperation schemes. The reason for the Council's decision was the lack of academic autonomy at formerly state-owned Hungarian universities that had been taken over by newly created foundations, in which government officials and other regime confidants became government-appointed members of board of trustees with unlimited tenures.

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