



# ILLIBERAL CULTURAL WAR AND HEGEMONY-BUILDING IN HUNGARIAN ACADEMIA: SCHOLARS BETWEEN COOPTATION AND RESISTANCE

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## Illiberal Regime-Building in Hungary

Following a short tenure around the millennium, Viktor Orbán became the prime minister of Hungary again in 2010. Now the strongman of illiberalism, he [won the most recent elections](#) in 2022 as well. Under his leadership, which has now endured for more than a decade, Hungarian democracy has [declined enormously](#). The de-democratization has occurred in a step-by-step manner, transforming the country into a prominent example of latter-day [autocratization](#).

Despite the huge differences between the two countries, the Hungarian and American strains of illiberalism are comparable, both [at the state level](#) and [in the field of academia](#). Especially striking are the sociological similarities between the conservative supporters of illiberalism in the two countries. Nonetheless, the resilience of the democratic institutions and the supportive effects of political culture in the United States may serve as better counterforces to tyrannical will than exist in Hungary. And, as David L. Swartz noted for in response to a question at the 2022 ECPR conference, one crucial obstacle to illiberal occupation of academia in the United States is the private character of most of the country's universities, in contrast to Hungary's largely state-funded universities—where recent “privatization” has in practice meant occupation by Orbán's cronies.

Hungary can be seen both as a model of illiberal regime-building and as a warning against the dangers that illiberalism poses to democracy. The occupation of academia is part of this regime-building, which embraces a cultural war, or an antagonistic fight led by the strongman-captured state. This situation calls for conceptualizing the effects not only on democracy, but also on citizens. The academy comprises both supporters of Orbán's illiberal turn and those who are either regime opponents or neutral researchers. The former are generally responsible for the heteronomous intervention of politics into the relatively autonomous academic sphere, and the latter should use diverse strategies to overcome this. Interpreting these practices from a non-neutral pro-democratic standpoint and from the perspective of the oppressed, this paper explores the burdens that an illiberal turn puts on the shoulders of anyone living under such conditions.

## Declaration of Culture War

But how—in what way—does such an occupation of a state, including a specific sphere, happen? Should an illiberal turn have an ideological—that is, a discursively explicated—background? Interestingly, there was a

moment when Orbán expressed his will to transform the whole character of Hungarian society and the state. After the third consecutive victory of his party Fidesz (Alliance of Young Democrats) in 2018, [he declared](#) it his goal to build a “new era”:

And our two-thirds victory in 2018 is nothing short of a mandate to build a new era. [...] An era is a special and characteristic cultural reality. An era is a spiritual order [...]. A political system is usually determined by rules and political decisions. An era, however, is more than this. 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.

It is worth quoting these phrases at length, as they highlight that the logic of regime-building contains a moment when conflict intensifies, since politics aims to reach the very bottom of society in order to rewrite it. This practice rests on the polarization of society and deeply affects people’s lives. Orbán expresses here his intention to intervene into “culture” broadly construed, subsuming it under the aims of a political regime that wants to extend its life beyond the normal periodicity of democracies. This kind of “era-building” is a deliberate call for a political culture war led by the state.

Moving from a *regime* to an *era* entails a moment of intensity change in the polarizing dynamics. The supporting ideology seems to be a combination of, among others, the [Schmittian political](#), which explicates politics as an inherently combative endeavor; the [Gramscian idea of hegemony](#), which helps to highlight the relevance of culture for politics and can be read as a call to occupy it; and, tacitly, [Tilo Schabert](#)’s theory of [governance and leadership](#), which rests on the relevance of strong leaders in politics and the need to always stir up conditions and place occupied institutions in the hands of loyal cronies. It is interesting, although compatible with contemporary populisms, that the supporting regime ideology combines right- and left-wing ideological elements. Although some of these elements are borrowed from the left, they are transformed, with the oversimplification of politics, into sheer battle, as exemplified in the works on culture war of a regime ideologue, [Márton Békés](#), who sketches the “political equation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” for the “new right... that is not afraid of being revolutionary” as “Schmitt + Gramsci = Victory.”

The ideological background, as well as political discourse and institutional changes, serve to ground a kind of culture war, which always stems from—or is an expression of—political polarization. Orbán’s logic of regime-/era-building does not rest on the acceptance of the other but wants to minimize everything that resembles the other. To refer to [Chantal Mouffe](#)’s agonistic democratic theory, these are not the kind of agonistic conflicts that are necessary for democratic flourishing; instead, they represent an exclusionary illiberal practice that de-democratizes the country.

But what shape has this antagonistic logic taken in the cultural field? If we restrict our focus to the academic field, it is clear that it had undergone enormous change even before Orbán’s declaration of 2018. Universities lost most of their [economic autonomy](#) in the early 2010s; then [CEU was expelled](#) from the country after a series of political attacks; and around that time the government [banned state-supported gender studies education](#) by administrative means. Before the declaration, there was an (albeit sporadic) effort to build a parallel system of institutions through the creation of various historical institutes, an important move for the creation of a nationalist identity; thereafter, a more strategic and overarching restructuring occurred. Almost all the state-owned universities were “privatized”—meaning, in effect, that their leadership boards were packed by Orbán’s cronies, including incumbent ministers. On top of this, substantial financial support was given to [Mathias Corvinus Collegium](#), an institute with close ties to Fidesz.

Both political argumentation and its supporting ideology indicate an intent to change the intensity of political conflict. This seems to reflect a project that aims at a total occupation of culture. However, elite studies by individuals such as [Luca Kristóf](#) suggest that hegemonization was unsuccessful in various fields in the 2010s, especially in those subfields—like literature—where it is not formal status, but informal reputation, that matters. Moreover, as [Barna et al.](#) suggest, the different logics of ideological production limited overall cultural homogenization.

It seems that right-wing hegemonization may have internal limitations, whether imposed by elite rivalry, the reality of heterogeneous principles governing the field, or the fact that the field to be hegemonized is simply too large. Nonetheless, the regime aims to transform the whole cultural field, going beyond the goals and tools that are common in the cultural policy of contemporary democracies.

### Different Intensities of Hegemonization

As hegemonic practice intensifies, it urges the creation of a regime ideology and puts pressure on people to legitimize regime-building. [Gramscian and post-Gramscian theory](#) is useful here not just because it influences the horizon of regime intellectuals and leaders, but because it enables us to differentiate between interventions into the academy on the basis of intensity: cooptation and extension are two kinds of hegemonic practice that can be drawn from it.

Cooptation refers to an extension of power that moves forward in the ideological sphere by incorporating existing elements, along with those people in the field who are inclined to compromise. This is not a situation of sheer suppression or deliberate political intervention. It may lead to self-censorship, but equally, it may take a far smoother form: academics can continue to operate autonomously, but with new colleagues, generally less prepared academically, who support the regime. The former group of academics serve to legitimize these new colleagues' less academic practices, producing tacit support for the regime's ideology.

In terms of discursive content, cooptation means incorporating existing discursive elements but putting them into a different context. Historical studies may serve as good examples, as these are generally high-level research but can also be parts of a nationalist intellectual agenda. We can see here a rather blurred picture—real academic practice in a heteronomous academic context—that proves the transitory character of any compromise. It is perhaps no coincidence that in the first, less intensive period of cultural intervention, a set of historical institutes were established, forming a parallel institutional system to the standard set of academic institutions that already existed.

Cooptation is beneficial for powerholders, for two reasons. First, the ideological elements already exist, so powerholders do not have to invest in their innovation. Second, the compromise-oriented character of hegemony dramatically curtails opportunities for resistance. Part of the deal is that a coopted citizen stays in the compromised situation (or accepts the deal), remaining silent at points when it would be worth engaging in critique. Cooptation thus involves tacit legitimization, not active ideological activity, and individuals retain a limited amount of autonomy.

In the expansive model, powerholders seek to conquer the field. Room for maneuver is not only limited but close to disappearing. Academics are expected to follow the rules, decisions, and even unspoken will of the powerholders: they must have tacit knowledge of the oppressive rule. The academic function is not passive but active legitimization; scholars are required to take part in ideological production. This condition may have the somewhat unexpected consequence of supporting the articulation of antagonism, albeit outside the local regime of hegemonization.

What does extension, an expansive strategy of hegemonization, look like? The post-2018 phase of the culture war led to an overwhelming institutional transformation. An example of such a major intervention is the way the [University of Theatre and Film Arts](#) was practically privatized and occupied by a Fideszist board of trustees, leading to a series of student-professor protests (a very rare event due to the weakness of Hungarian civil society) that culminated in most of the academic staff being replaced with supporters of the regime.

Even minor interventions hint at what a culture war looks like as part of an illiberal regime-building effort. One example is anecdotal evidence that even in a STEM field, expressing one's political opinion on Facebook can result in an academic failing to receive national-level financial support. Another example is the case of the National University of Public Service, a Fidesz-flagship university with direct links to the Prime Minister's Office. In 2018, while I was working there, we organized a political theory conference that accepted gender studies papers, although the name of the relevant panel was carefully chosen to avoid using the "G-word." Some weeks later, a minister in the Prime Minister's Office called the head of the institute responsible to ask "what it was." Although this kind of micro-management is arguably rare, macro-level changes and the fact that intervention can occur on the micro level create an unfavorable climate for free academic research.

### Freedom under Constraint

Illiberal regime-building and the culture war have an impact on individual lives and choices. Looking at this situation from the perspective of those for whom this situation is unfavorable, let us pose an important question: what is the extent of their freedom and what are the limits thereon?

Cooptation is permissive compared to expansive hegemony. But the room for maneuver is not static; the borders of freedom should therefore be explored from time to time. In situations of cooptation, researchers are used to legitimize causes unrelated to academia or causes coming from the political power. At a certain point, they may start to wonder whether it would be more advantageous to explicitly identify themselves with the regime, building a profile of loyalty and creating/renewing the regime's ideology.

The limitations on their freedom and the retaliatory consequences for overstepping these bounds are heavier burdens for those who do not identify themselves with the regime. Powerholders—whether state or local—will likely invest more resources in coopting or, if cooptation fails, oppressing them. Coopting political-ideological enemies is a strategic choice for powerholders, for two main reasons. First, a coopted researcher appears on the radar of power, which can control her or him through punishment or reward. Second, coopting a researcher makes it possible to divide similar-minded intellectual groups, as cooptation forces them to decide who is a friend, who is an enemy, and what kind of actions are acceptable under pressure. In other words, cooptation blurs the boundaries of identities and the formerly clear-cut difference between the morally good and bad.

In practice, it can be hard to capture the point where passive legitimacy must become active. This is supposedly due to the rhetorical nature of power, which should never reveal how it functions; it should hide its violent core. The change seems to be induced by a change in the intensity of politics. Expansive hegemony and active legitimacy demands are fostered by polarization.

I have tried to outline the logic of hegemonization as a regime-building strategy in the field of epistemic authority. I hope it has become clear that these strategies restrict freedom, and individuals are expected to react to this fact. Individual answers may differ, and there are various means to self-legitimize obedience. Indeed, there are numerous reasons that people accept such unwanted rule.

First, there is *fear-led compromise*. The inner voice of this type might sound like: “The fear of retaliation motivates me to make a compromise. And therefore, I try to convince the Power that I am a good guy.” Second, there is *bureaucratic/pragmatic compromise*. The inner voice says: “I am making a compromise because I want to satisfy the demands of power, and I cannot do it in any other way. This is a common thing; this is just a job.” Third, there is *career-based compromise*: “I will do this because I am a clever guy who carves out advantages even from drawbacks. If I have to compromise, then it is better to make a career as well.” A subcategory of this third group is when one experiences this pressure not as a compromise but as an opportunity: “I am the one who has recognized that a little flattery may help me to bypass limitations and launch my career/have more money/have more influence/have more prestige.”

### Room for Maneuver and Limitations on Academic Research

Scholars’ ability to conduct research under constrained conditions depends on external factors, and context-dependency leads to various types of research, of which I identify three: 1. *Justifying (legitimizing)*, 2. *Standard*, and 3. *Critical*.

*Justifying works* are those that fulfill the political or ideological needs of the power. Examples of justifying research are nationalism studies that support national identity-building or articles written by regime intellectuals exploring the constitutional and legitimate character of the already [permanent state of exception](#).

*Standard work* is that which can be produced under normal conditions, without political interference, and which follows the norms of professional standards. (Let us leave aside the serious problems this kind of academia may have.)

By *critical work*, I refer to academic works that are seen as being critical of power; they are “critical” from the perspective of the power-holders. This demonstrates that an authoritarian-leaning power can always be challenged by standard science, not just by a well-defined normative position or by a science that is explicitly critical of the regime.

*Coopted* authors should make mainly standard science, although part of the deal is that it is forbidden to write about certain issues or that they must be re-contextualized in a way suited to the regime’s ideological perspective (for example, following academic norms and standards but calling the field “family studies” instead of “gender studies”). The difference between that which is ideologically proper and that which is improper is generally tacit, not forced.

In *expansive* hegemony, both standard and justifying scholarly works can be produced, but the power aims to make them the same. That is, they aim to turn their socio-political vision into an internationally recognized standard. This puts pressure on academics, and may be the point where a non-supporter of illiberalism reaches the limit of cooperation.

A representative of power can *read* works through a critical scholarly lens at any time. Anything can turn out to be critical academic work—that is, work that is critical of to the regime and therefore capable of threatening it—*after the fact*. For example, Andrea Kozáry, a deceased professor formerly at the National University of Public Service, wrote extensively on [hate crimes](#) in law enforcement, including the gender perspective, and organized a conference on these themes in 2019, when the Orbán government’s moral and political crusade against gender studies was rising to the intensity of the friend/enemy distinction. Following trumped-up charges, [she was fired](#). The practical reason for this might be not only that conference, but her general profile.

In the longer term, less intensive interventions than firing decisions also affect people's choices. Together, these practices can effectively support illiberal regime-building in a cultural field.

### **Some Conclusions**

The academy is just one part of culture, broadly construed, that is valuable for illiberal regime-building. It has a specific epistemic authority useful for ideological production and legitimacy creation. Supposedly, it will always be exposed to authoritarian-leaning politics, as academics can play a significant role both in legitimizing and in criticizing power. Understanding the subjugation of the academy or its parts is important because it can illuminate methods of subjugation that might be extended to the whole of society. What the Hungarian case teaches us is that state capture by a leader or a party can be detrimental to democracy and that this will not stop at superficial aspects of human existence. A "culture war" is led by a single power in an effort to influence the foundations of society. It may lead to extreme, civil war-like divisions of society and to the general loss of individual freedom. In order to avoid this, citizens should be aware of the danger posed by leaders who aim to divide society and exploit this division for the sake of remaining in power. As the Hungarian case also suggests, it is a far greater task to regain lost democracy than to push back the will that tries to destroy democracy.