



Illiberal Leaders in the International Arena: The Cases of Hungary and Israel

HADAS ARON AND EMILY J. HOLLAND

Abstract

In recent years, illiberal leaders have become increasingly influential on the global stage. This paper examines the international behavior of such leaders. Using the cases of Hungary under Viktor Orbán and Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu, we demonstrate that illiberal leaders prioritize domestic agendas designed to maintain their power above all else. While they may exhibit disruptive behavior in the international arena on issues peripheral to their core domestic interests, they tend to eventually compromise in these areas. However, when there is a conflict between their central domestic agenda and the broader interests of the state, the narrow domestic agenda takes precedence.

Keywords: illiberalism, Israel, Hungary, foreign Policy, international system, liberal international order

Hadas Aron
Assistant Professor of Political Science, The George Washington University, USA
hadas.aron@gwu.edu

Emily J. Holland
Assistant Professor Strategic and Operational Research Department, US Naval War College, USA
emily.holland@usnwc.edu

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Over the past decade, illiberal leaders have played an increasingly prominent role in world politics. These leaders have championed illiberalism as a new path forward for their states and the global community. In this paper, we examine the international behavior of illiberal leaders and argue that their primary objective of consolidating domestic power can result in foreign policies that prioritize domestic electoral interests over the wider interests of the state. Specifically, where commitments to international alliances and institutions clash with the domestic agenda of concentrating power and limiting political competition, illiberal leaders will favor the narrow domestic interest. This holds even when the illiberal policy harms crucial state interests such as security or economic prosperity. Illiberal leaders will be more cooperative in the international arena on policies that do not threaten their illiberal domestic system or the preferences of their immediate support base. Although international relations literature demonstrates that domestic politics is sometimes a driver for foreign policy,¹ in democracies it is generally not entirely driven by narrow domestic electoral concerns. The international behavior of illiberal leaders is thus distinct from other types of leaders.

We evaluate this argument using the cases of Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Israel under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. We show that, for the most part, illiberal leaders comply with international demands when faced with existential economic and security pressures. However, they are more likely to reject the norms of behavior of the international system when these pressures threaten the integrity of their domestic support base. Moreover, over time illiberal leaders tend to become more disruptive and less cooperative in the international arena. Our research suggests several possible reasons for this behavior. First, illiberal leaders promote and incorporate narratives of nationalism and extremism into their political discourse and policy. Second, illiberals bring extremists into their midst, elevating them to prominent political positions. Finally, and relatedly, illiberal leaders tend to degrade the quality of the foreign-policy apparatus by replacing professional personnel with more corrupt and ideologically driven civil servants.

Illiberalism: Definition and Scope

Illiberalism is an ideology that rejects liberalism, including liberal values, domestic institutions intended to serve as checks on power, and the web of international institutions that has codified relations between states since World War II. Illiberals hold conservative positions on a variety of issues, particularly traditional gender roles, state sovereignty, nationalism, and the hegemony of majority ethnic groups.²

Illiberalism is common in countries that have had a significant liberal experience but are now experiencing a backlash. As a result, popular support and electoral success are essential elements of illiberalism.³ Unlike their liberal counterparts, illiberals secure popular support through a variety of means that defy the rule of law. To stay in power, illiberal leaders undermine checks and balances between institutions, attempt to control the media, delegitimize political rivals, and distribute targeted

1 Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 881–912. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081830003201X>; William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, 3rd ed., eds. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 35–53.

2 Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (April 2022): 303–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>; Julian G. Waller, "Distinctions with a Difference: Illiberalism and Authoritarianism in Scholarly Study," *Political Studies Review* 22, no. 2 (May 2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299231159253>.

3 Hadas Aron and Jack L. Snyder, "The International Politics of Illiberalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024): 1–41.

benefits for their constituents.⁴ They also mobilize against minorities, in particular ethnic minorities, immigrants, feminists, and the LGBTQ+ community.⁵ The need for a popular mandate distinguishes these nations, which have turned illiberal after experiencing liberalism, from anti-liberal states—those that are not liberal and have never embraced liberalism on a large scale.

Illiberalism has increased in a variety of contexts. First, illiberalism emerged as a counter-reaction to the spread of liberalism after the end of the Cold War. In states that lacked the social and institutional framework to support liberal democracy, liberalism often proved a destructive force. Rapid privatization and the opening of markets to competition often turned into the sale of state assets to well-connected individuals.⁶ Similarly, freedom of speech without media regulation led to nationalist incitement.⁷ Prominent examples of this include Russia, whose economy collapsed twice during the 1990s, and the former Yugoslavia, where nationalist mobilization erupted into a civil war. Illiberalism was a response to this crisis of democracy. According to illiberals, a strong central government, uninhibited by liberal institutions, is more capable of addressing social upheaval and economic challenges.

Illiberalism is also common where a struggle between liberal and illiberal elites is a central characteristic of the political system. These cases are the focus of our paper. This struggle over the ordering of politics and society is common in Central and Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. In these countries, the 1990s were characterized by rapid changes that raised unemployment and emigration, and at the same time, by the pursuit of economic prosperity and integration into the European Union. Despite an overall improvement in living standards, there was a strong sense of disappointment when jubilant post-Cold War expectations were not met.⁸ This disappointment deepened the historical rift between a liberal urban population that views itself as part of Western Europe and periphery populations who resent liberalism and wish to preserve their unique identity and maintain sovereignty vis-à-vis the West. Illiberalism is built on this divide.

Though Israel is not a post-Communist country, it went through several similar processes that can account for the struggle between liberalism and illiberalism that has come to define society and the political system. First, rapid liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s deepened socio-economic cleavages, far more than in most of Central-Eastern Europe. Second, liberalism expanded significantly in Israel, primarily through the role of the Supreme Court as a constitutional court, and relatedly, in the protection of individual rights. Lastly and most significantly, the

4 Andrea LP Pirro and Ben Stanley, "Forging, Bending, and Breaking: Enacting the 'Illiberal Playbook' in Hungary and Poland," *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 1 (2022): 86–101, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001924>; Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes: A Conceptual Framework* (Central European University Press, 2020); Licia Cianetti, James Dawson, and Seán Hanley, "Rethinking 'Democratic Backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe—Looking beyond Hungary and Poland" (Taylor & Francis, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2018.1491401>.

5 Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti, "The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?" *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 166–176, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1156>; Anna Grzymala-Busse and Monika Nalepa, "How Illiberal Populists Gain and Stay in Power: Programmatic Cohesion and Government Performance," (unpublished manuscript, 2022), https://www.monikanalepa.com/uploads/6/6/3/1/66318923/clear_winners_programmatic_ambiguity_and_the_electoral_punishment_of_populists.pdf; Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, "The Real Crisis of Global Order: Illiberalism on the Rise," *Foreign Affairs* 101 (January/February 2022), 103, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-12-14/illiberalism-real-crisis-global-order>.

6 Joel S. Hellman, "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions," *World Politics* 50, no. 2 (January 1998): 203–234, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100008091>.

7 Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).

8 Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning* (Penguin UK, 2019); Jacques Rupnik, "From Democracy Fatigue to Populist Backlash," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (2007): 17–25, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/is-east-central-europe-backsliding-from-democracy-fatigue-to-populist-backlash/>.

ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the control over the Occupied Territories have never co-existed comfortably with a liberal guarantee of individual rights.

In the past few years, illiberalism has also made advancements in Western liberal democracies. The most striking example is the success of President Donald Trump in the United States. In these mature democracies, illiberal success stems from a backlash to globalization and accompanying economic and cultural insecurities. It is important to note that, as in other parts of the world, in recent decades Western liberalism expanded its institutional and cultural arenas. Constitutional courts and international economic institutions expanded their mandates, which triggered an illiberal backlash. For example, in the Eurozone, decisions on economic measures like debt accumulation are subject to EU scrutiny; in the UK, the 1998 Human Rights Act incorporated the European Convention of Human Rights into British Law, a step seen by some as a transformation of the Westminster system.⁹

As noted, we focus here on cases of illiberalism in states that experience a struggle between liberalism and illiberalism. We do so for two reasons. First, these states can more easily and consistently be defined as illiberal. States that have been nominal democracies can easily slip into full authoritarianism, where legitimization from the people (or some subsection of the people) is no longer relevant. Such cases cannot be consistently categorized as illiberal according to our definition. This is probably the case in Russia today.

Second, we wish to avoid analyzing great powers. Arguably, both Donald Trump in the US and Vladimir Putin in Russia have been illiberal leaders of great powers. However, great powers have unique behavior in the international system¹⁰ and the cases are extremely limited and idiosyncratic. The international behavior of great powers differs from that of small and status quo powers because they have greater means, and therefore greater freedom to realize their goals. As such, great powers set the stage for the behavior of other actors.

We employ two cases to demonstrate our theory: Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Both leaders have been in power for many years, allowing us to examine their behavior in multiple situations and observe transformations in decision-making over time. In recent years, both Israel and Hungary have moved towards illiberalism and have been heavily criticized by the liberal international community for their attempts to curtail liberal democracy. Netanyahu and Orbán have also invested in relationships with other illiberal leaders, despite their position within and dependence on the liberal community. Although the outcomes of their leadership appear similar, Israel and Hungary face different sets of constraints, a variation we exploit here. Hungary is a European Union member state, and its behavior is shaped by the benefits and obligations of membership. Israel faces different constraints. Its involvement in ongoing conflict in the Middle East makes it existentially dependent on its international alliances, primarily its relationship with the US. Together, the cases provide a wide spectrum of international situations with which illiberal leaders are faced.

Illiberalism and International Behavior

One of the most common actions of illiberal leaders is an attack on liberal institutions that limit government power. Liberal allies frequently criticize policies that undermine liberal democracy and target minorities. This is particularly true when a state is an integral member of the Western liberal order, as are the cases this paper addresses. To stave off this liberal critique, illiberal leaders form nontraditional

⁹ K. D. Ewing, "The Human Rights Act and Parliamentary Democracy," *The Modern Law Review* 62, no. 1 (1999): 79–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2230.00192>.

¹⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

international alliances with fellow illiberals and with anti-liberal China, which has never experienced liberalism and is distinctly opposed to it.¹¹

Alliances outside the liberal world are intended to provide immediate economic benefits in the form of trade and investments. Russia has been funding illiberal groups in many countries and pursuing favorable trade relations with allies. China has been cultivating diplomatic and economic relationships around the globe, especially via its Belt and Road Initiative.¹² In the West, many of the states that signed on to the initiative were led by illiberals. Second, nontraditional illiberal alliances empower illiberals in their dealings with liberals because they signal an alternative to the liberal alliance.

Illiberal alliances have also been fruitful for the diffusion of illiberal practices. Viktor Orbán, for example, has emerged as a role model for illiberals. His methods of power centralization, the undermining of courts, and the takeover of the media have become a form of “best practices” for illiberal leaders.¹³ Indeed, in the past few years, illiberal leaders have taken more aggressive courses of action. Robert Fico, the Prime Minister of Slovakia for 10 years, became radically opposed to Western liberalism at home and abroad only in the last few years. Netanyahu, the longest-serving Israeli prime minister, has become far more illiberal since 2015. Pursuing these new relationships, illiberal leaders neglect and endanger their important liberal alliances.

Our analysis focuses on tensions between international liberal commitments and a commitment to the illiberal turn. Such tensions are particularly evident in situations that force illiberals to pick between the two. We argue that the strongest commitment of illiberal leaders is to the domestic arrangements that keep them in power. Illiberals are unlikely to retract reforms that limit political competition and secure their domestic position, even when these clash with the state’s international commitments and threaten its international position. Similarly, illiberals will prioritize the interests of their base of supporters above all. When the state’s commitment to liberal allies and institutions conflicts with the dismantling of liberal institutions, or with the trade and security preferences of the illiberal base, illiberals will prioritize domestic illiberalism over international commitments. This holds even if international commitments to alliances and institutions are vital to the interests of the state and the broader population.

Illiberals will be less rigid and more willing to cooperate with liberals on issues that are not central to their domestic agenda, even if these issues clash with the broader international illiberal agenda. In such cases, illiberals may still be disruptive, consistent with their leadership style, but will not ultimately be obstructionist.

In our case study analysis, we examine events in which liberal commitments clashed with illiberal policies, forcing illiberals to navigate between narrow personal and state interests. The Russo-Ukrainian War is an example of this for Hungary, and Netanyahu’s formation of the most extreme right-wing government in Israeli history has significantly worsened tensions between Israel and Western allies.

The focus on narrow domestic interests is quite unusual in foreign policy-making. Classic international relations literature argues that foreign policy is the pursuit of the “national interest” defined in terms of power maximization.¹⁴ Newer literature examines the patterns of bias leaders are faced with when making policy, including

11 Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

12 Cooley and Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony*.

13 Kim Lane Scheppele, “Autocratic Legalism,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (March 2018): 545–584.

14 Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1985).

bounded rationality¹⁵ and organizational culture.¹⁶ Most of the literature assumes that, despite imperfect information or miscalculation, most foreign-policy behavior is conducted to further the perceived interest of the state. Literature on authoritarian states argues that when states have small winning coalitions, leaders stay in power by rewarding their supporters with private goods, which allows them to take more risks in foreign policy.¹⁷ But the illiberal states we discuss here are democracies, making the prioritization of narrow domestic interests in foreign policy exceptional.

We expect this foreign-policy behavior to increase over time, such that illiberal states will risk damaging their liberal alliances and the core interests of their state. Our research suggests several possible explanations for this. First, illiberals promote narratives of national sovereignty and state sufficiency that are unrealistic in an increasingly interdependent world. Illiberals are not committed to the truth and often promote false narratives and conspiracy theories.¹⁸ In doing so, they risk tying their own hands through a commitment to a radical base of support.¹⁹

In addition, illiberal policies have consequences for the government's decision-making environment. In their quest to concentrate power, illiberal leaders degrade their ability to craft policy in a limited information environment. Illiberal leaders tend to replace competent civil servants with less professional, more personalist and ideologically driven ones.²⁰

Illiberalism and International Politics in Hungary

Since he took office for the second time, beginning in 2010, Viktor Orbán has faced international criticism for his illiberal practices. However, not all illiberal policies have the same weight in the international arena. In this section, we examine Orbán's policies according to their importance to his illiberal domestic agenda and to Hungary's Western allies. We show here that policies critical to Orbán's domestic agenda prevailed, even when facing costly external sanctions. In contrast, in areas that were less central to Orbán's domestic agenda and more crucial to Western allies, Orbán's government eventually compromised and aligned with Western international policies.

Domestic Illiberalism in Hungary versus the European Union

Orbán's illiberal domestic policies, in particular the attack on the courts and media, have brought him into a direct and sometimes costly confrontation with the European Union. Controlling and weakening the judicial system was key to Orbán's illiberal agenda. Without independent courts, his Fidesz party-led government could pass decisions with virtually no checks on its power, including weakening non-governmental institutional checks on power by institutions like independent media and civil society organizations.

15 Herbert Alexander Simon, *Models of Bounded Rationality: Empirically Grounded Economic Reason*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).

16 Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 65–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539120>.

17 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (December 1999): 791–807, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2586113>.

18 Andrea Lp Pirro and Paul Taggart, "Populists in Power and Conspiracy Theories," *Party Politics* 29, no. 3 (May 2023): 413–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221077071>; Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King, "Illiberalism," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 61, no. 3 (December 2020): 365–405, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181>.

19 Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

20 Michael W. Bauer et al., *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration: How Populists in Government Transform State Bureaucracies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Independent domestic courts are also of interest to the international community, particularly within the context of the European Union. First, independent courts are the hallmark of liberal democracy as they uphold the rule of law and protect individual rights. A vast body of literature demonstrates that liberal states cooperate with each other at higher rates than other regime types on a variety of issues from security to trade.²¹ The EU was built on shared liberal-democratic values, rather than merely on short-term interests. Following from these foundational shared liberal values, EU institutions rely on broad consensus between member states. These institutions are ill-equipped to handle persistently noncompliant states.²²

On a more pragmatic level, independent courts safeguard against corruption and misuse of funds. Weakening the courts poses a challenge for international investors. The EU, moreover, distributes significant funds to member states, especially those with lower gross national income like Hungary.

Various European institutions responded to Hungary's wide-ranging attack on the independence of its courts. The European Commission initiated infringement procedures against Hungary, the most notable of which was a response to the decision to abruptly lower the retirement age of judges by eight years, forcing into retirement a significant portion of the state's senior judges (those aged 62–70 in 2011). As part of the procedure, the case moved to the European Court of Justice, which ruled in 2012 that Hungary's actions were incompatible with European Union law. Hungary was forced to compensate the unlawfully dismissed judges but did not reinstate most of them.²³ Thus, though it lost the case, its illiberal agenda remained virtually intact. This was the most notable international court ruling against Hungary's attack on liberal democracy.

The European Parliament issued several condemnatory reports that outlined and criticized Hungary's democratic erosion and in 2018, triggering an Article 7 procedure against Hungary (a procedure used when a member state is considered at risk of breaching core EU values). If enacted, Article 7 procedures can be a significant sanction and may entail stripping a member state of its voting rights (referred to as the "nuclear option"). However, the Council of the European Union did not move the procedure past the first stage, where it languished for years. The Council did express concern for the erosion of democracy in Hungary and sought the opinion of the Venice Commission on several occasions. The Venice Commission criticized key pieces of legislation that undermined liberal democracy.²⁴

Finally, in 2020, the European Union negotiated a covid-19 recovery plan that tied the allocation of funds to adherence to rule-of-law standards. Hungary and Poland threatened to veto the plan, and eventually the parties agreed on a watered-down version of the provision. In late 2022, the European Commission invoked this standard and withheld Hungary's share of the Covid-19 Recovery and Resilience Plan (€10.4 billion in grants and low-interest loans). Moreover, due to concerns regarding judicial independence and human rights, the Commission decided to withhold disbursement of Hungary's Cohesion Fund as well—€22 billion for national

21 Edward D. Mansfield and Helen V. Milner, "Regime Type, Veto Points, and Preferential Trading Arrangements," *Stanford Journal of International Law* 46, no. 2 (summer 2010), 219; Bruce Russett et al., "The Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (spring 1995): 164–184, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539124>.

22 Bojan Bugarić, "Protecting Democracy and the Rule of Law in the European Union: The Hungarian Challenge," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, July 15, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2466340>; Jan-Werner Müller, "Should the EU Protect Democracy and the Rule of Law inside Member States?," *European Law Journal* 21, no. 2 (March 1, 2015): 141–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12124>; SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, July 15, 2014).

23 Kriszta Kovács and Kim Lane Scheppele, "The Fragility of an Independent Judiciary: Lessons from Hungary and Poland—and the European Union," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 3 (September 2018): 189–200, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.07.005>.

24 Gábor Halmai, "The Early Retirement Age of the Hungarian Judges," in *EU Law Stories: Contextual and Critical Histories of European Jurisprudence*, eds. Fernanda Nicola and Bill Davies (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

investment projects.²⁵ This was by far the most far-reaching international sanction against Hungary, implemented more than a decade after the Orbán government launched an attack on democracy that, according to experts, altered Hungary's regime. Importantly, the EU's increased scrutiny and willingness to act came in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, as we discuss in the next section.

Since taking office in 2010, the Orbán government has taken steps to erode democracy. Even when these actions directly impacted the European Union, they incurred minimal costs. When the costs increased, Orbán remained steadfast, because the concentration of power and elimination of checks on it are at the very core of his agenda. Though the Orbán government does enact other disruptive foreign policies, it is less committed to pursuing these policies when sanctioned.

Hungary, Non-Western Allies, and the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine

In his infamous "illiberal democracy" speech in 2014, Orbán proclaimed that illiberal and non-liberal states like Russia, China, Singapore, and others, were role models for Hungary.²⁶ In some respects, his foreign policies have followed the spirit of this speech. Since 2010, Viktor Orbán's government has declared its intent to expand to non-Western markets in order to reinforce Hungary's sovereignty and independence vis-à-vis Western allies. In addition, increased trade with non-liberal states provides economic benefits that are not conditional on maintaining standards of governance. The government has dedicated a section of the Ministry of the Economy to non-Western markets, and Orbán has cultivated close political as well as economic ties with Russia and China.²⁷ Orbán consistently pursued close energy ties with Russia, even signing a long-term gas contract with Russia's Gazprom after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.²⁸ Hungary was the first European country to join China's Belt and Road development program, leading the way for other post-Communist European states.²⁹ China also committed to several investment projects in Hungary, including lithium-ion battery manufacturing factories, an electric vehicle factory, and the foundation of a new university.³⁰ The close relationship was highlighted during Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's 2024 state visit to Hungary.

This apparent shift toward non-Western allies only partially and recently altered the Hungarian economy. Hungary remains dependent on its Western allies for security and trade: more than 70% of both its imports and exports are with EU countries.³¹ Foreign manufacturing, particularly for the German auto industry and European appliances, sustains the Hungarian labor force. And, of course, Hungary remains dependent on its NATO membership for security.

After the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, Hungary's close ties with Russia were strained when the EU placed Russia under a limited sanctions regime. Orbán

25 Lorne Cook, "EU Unblocks Billions for Hungary Even Though Its Leader Threatens to Veto Ukraine Aid," AP News, December 13, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/eu-hungary-ukraine-funds-cohesion-infrastructure-democracy-01c7a6927e7b4711a56336d4b9c2916>.

26 Csaba Tóth, "Full Text of Viktor Orbán's Speech at Băile Tușnad (Tusnádfürdő) of 26 July 2014," Budapest Beacon (news site), July 29, 2014, <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>.

27 Zsuzsanna Végh, "Hungary's 'Eastern Opening' Policy toward Russia: Ties That Bind?" *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 24, nos. 1–2 (2015): 47–65.

28 Wilhelmine Preussen, "Hungary Signs New Gas Deal with Gazprom," *Politico*, August 31, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-signs-deal-with-gazprom-over-additional-gas/>.

29 Anastas Vangeli, "China's Engagement with the Sixteen Countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe under the Belt and Road Initiative," *China & World Economy* 25, no. 5 (September–October 2017): 101–124, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cwe.12216>.

30 Valerie Hopkins, "Chinese University to Open Budapest Campus as Orbán Tilts to Beijing," *Financial Times*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/55565169-98f3-4391-8df8-5adf30d814f9>.

31 United States Department of State, "2023 Investment Climate Statements: Hungary," Department of State website, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-investment-climate-statements/hungary/>.

attempted to limit the sanctions, but ultimately Hungary complied with the EU program, and accordingly, its trade volume with Russia decreased significantly.³² Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine proved to be a far greater challenge for Orbán. For NATO, this was an opportunity to re-establish its commitment to European security and to emphasize unity after concerns over the integrity of the alliance during the Trump administration. Support for Russia became politically toxic, and European leaders who had previously held close ties with Putin's Russia had to change their course or lay low. Hungary's neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe viewed Russia as an existential threat, especially Hungary's close ally Poland under the PiS government.

In February 2022, just a month before the Hungarian general elections, and with the united opposition polling well, the Russian invasion of Ukraine could have been a turning point in Hungarian politics. But rather than changing course or staying silent, Orbán chose to double down on his support for Russia. Though this accusation was entirely baseless, Orbán accused Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky of trying to drag Hungary into war and stated that Orbán himself was the last line of defense against the outbreak of World War III. The Orbán government's near-complete control over Hungarian media resulted in most Hungarians accepting this narrative. Opinion polls demonstrate that Hungarian views on Russia and Ukraine, and their associated threat perception, differed significantly from public opinion in other countries in the region.³³

After winning the election, Orbán continued his attempts to block EU policies aimed at punishing Russia and supporting Ukraine. One issue of particular importance was EU sanctions on energy imports from Russia. A core component of the Fidesz government was subsidized energy prices for rural consumers, and sanctions on Russia's energy sector challenged Orbán's ability to provide affordable utilities for his rural base. Hungary has virtually no alternative sources of energy, a long-standing structural problem that was exacerbated by Orbán's strategy of pursuing close energy ties with Russia rather than diversifying sources and suppliers. As a result, EU sanctions on Russian energy imports were politically and economically disastrous for the Orbán regime. After threatening to veto the EU's embargo on Russian oil and oil products, the most severe sanction the bloc imposed on Russia, Hungary managed to secure an exemption for the import of Russian pipeline oil.³⁴ Hungary also secured an exemption to continue purchasing large volumes of Russian natural gas, but since 2022, the Orbán government has reduced its domestic energy subsidies overall while adding subsidies for firewood and coal.³⁵ Orbán has subsequently blamed the EU sanctions for Europe's energy crisis and potential recession.³⁶

Not all of Orbán's refusals to comply with EU policies were connected to energy; he has held up almost every Ukraine-supportive program, from the transfer of weapons and funds to the sanctions on banks and individuals. In addition, Hungary (following

32 Statista, "Export Value to Russia from Hungary 2021," Statista website, accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1000954/value-hungarian-goods-exports-to-russia/>.

33 Moira Fagan et al., "Poles and Hungarians Differ over Views of Russia and the US," Pew Research Center website, October 2, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/10/02/peles-and-hungarians-differ-over-views-of-russia-and-the-us/>; "Russian-Ukrainian Conflict: 61% of Hungarian Voters Think That Orbán Is the One Who Best Defends Hungarian Interests," Visegrád Post (news site), March 10, 2022, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2022/03/10/russian-ukrainian-conflict-61-of-hungarian-voters-think-that-orban-is-the-one-who-best-defends-hungarian-interests/>.

34 Kate Abnett, Jan Strupczewski, and Ingrid Melander, "EU Agrees Russia Oil Embargo, Gives Hungary Exemptions; Zelenskiy Vows More Sanctions," Reuters, June 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/best-we-could-get-eu-bows-hungarian-demands-agree-russian-oil-ban-2022-05-31/>.

35 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *OECD Companion to the Inventory of Support Measures for Fossil Fuels*, "Country Notes: Hungary," OECD website, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5a3ef665-en>.

36 "Hungary PM Orbán Says EU's Russia Sanctions Should Be Scrapped," Reuters, September 22, 2022, Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungary-pm-orban-says-eus-russia-sanctions-should-be-scrapped-report-2022-09-22/>.

Turkey's lead) held up the ratification of Sweden's NATO membership, noting Sweden's hostility and its critique of Hungary's democratic backsliding as the reason.

The EU and the United States responded to Hungary's lack of cooperation on this central issue with a mix of threat and persuasion. As noted above, the EU has been withholding funds from Hungary since 2022. Though the reason for this sanction is EU concern over the rule of law, there is no doubt that European attitudes toward Hungary have hardened due to the state's stance on the Russia-Ukraine War. As an expression of this growing hostility, since the beginning of the conflict, different actors have argued in favor of the so-called "nuclear option." This was first raised when Hungary initially refused to vote for a €50 billion aid package to Ukraine in 2023. But even after this crisis was resolved, the desire to move forward with the Article 7 procedure did not abate. In January 2024, the European Parliament demanded Article 7 proceedings be pushed forward due to rule-of-law and human-rights concerns, and in June 2024, Belgium, serving as the rotating president of the Council of the European Union, urged the EU to implement the toughest measures included under Article 7, stripping Hungary of many of the rights that member states enjoy. This was in advance of the scheduled transfer of the EU presidency to Hungary in July 2024.

Despite generating significant disruption and hold ups, Hungary eventually relented on every issue it had stalled and blocked, including sanctions, aid to Ukraine, and approving the accession of new NATO members. Orbán has used his veto power to increase his leverage vis-à-vis the EU. Notably, just a day before the European Summit in December 2023 in which Hungary threatened to hold up the resolution on an aid package to Ukraine, the European Commission released €10.2 billion of Hungary's frozen funds.³⁷ In response, the EU Parliament decided to sue the Commission in the European Court of Justice for misuse of taxpayer funds.³⁸ Because EU decision mechanisms are largely based on consensus, engaging in blackmail has been a particularly successful strategy for Orbán. The EU has often used financial incentives and special exemptions to persuade Orbán to agree to Union-level policies.

Orbán's government has been persistent in its pursuit of an illiberal transformation of Hungary's domestic political structure. In the international arena, Hungary's behavior remains more complex. Orbán has employed anti-EU rhetoric for years, but until its 2019 suspension, Fidesz was an active member of the European People's Party (EPP), the center-right bloc in the European Parliament. As such, it was relatively compliant with the mainstream centrist agenda of the EU. Hungary has only become an emboldened and disruptive actor in the last couple of years, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For the moment, it still largely votes in favor of EU policy, but stalls procedures and engages in blackmail. For its part, the EU did not respond decisively to Hungary's illiberal domestic policies for over a decade, even when these policies ran afoul of EU norms and rules.

Beyond the context of divided loyalties over the war in Ukraine, there are other potential explanations for Hungary's increasingly bold position vis-à-vis the EU. First, globally, illiberals have become less restrained—Netanyahu, whom we discuss next, is one example, but so are the increasingly illiberal rhetoric and actions of the likes of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India, Prime Minister Robert Fico in Slovakia, and former President Donald Trump running for a second term in office in the U.S. Arguably, the proliferation of illiberal leaders allows them to imitate each other's practices and rhetorical styles. Moreover, illiberals protect each other from international censure through diplomatic means, such as mutual support

37 Nicolas Camut, "Commission Unblocks €10.2B for Hungary as EU Tries to Sway Viktor Orbán on Ukraine," *Politico*, December 13, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/commission-unblocks-e10-2-billion-for-hungary-as-eu-tries-to-sway-viktor-orban-on-ukraine/>.

38 Andy Bounds, "EU Parliament Sues Ursula von Der Leyen's Commission over Hungary Funds," March 14, 2024, *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/4ed54bbb-559e-460c-9fdc-6a743d994c4b>.

in international institutions. These dynamics further embolden them.³⁹ Second, increasing Chinese investment has diversified investment sources in Hungary,⁴⁰ perhaps rendering it slightly less financially dependent on the EU (although for the time being, this should not be overestimated).

In addition, with limited independent media, Hungary's information environment has declined, and as a result, so has the ability of citizens and the opposition to keep the government and civil service in check. The civil service has also been hollowed out and is now partisan and loyal to the Fidesz party, and the foreign service has retreated from a pro-European ideology. More specifically, Muller and Gazsi show that a significant reorientation of the Hungarian institutions of diplomacy occurred after Orbán transformed the domestic arena, and in the context of EU resistance to his illiberal domestic policies. The main pillar of this reorientation was a new understanding of the diplomatic service as ideological rather than professional.⁴¹ This transformation of the diplomatic service integrated Orbán's anti-EU narratives into diplomatic decision-making.

Finally, the repeated weakness of EU responses can explain Hungary's increasingly disruptive behavior. Although the frustration with Hungary has increased and the withholding of EU funds was a significant rebuke, the EU has not systematically addressed the serious problem posed by Hungary. Invoking the latter stages of Article 7 requires a unanimous vote that the EU cannot obtain: Slovakia under Fico is likely to stand by Hungary, perhaps joined by Meloni's Italy. At the same time, the consensus-based decision mechanism grants member states many opportunities for bad-faith behavior. As we explore next, for the moment, different international sanctions mechanisms have also failed to induce compliance from Israel.

Illiberalism and International Politics in Israel

Benjamin Netanyahu and Viktor Orbán both suffered significant political losses relatively early in their careers. Orbán served as prime minister in Hungary from 1998 to 2002, while Netanyahu did so in Israel from 1996 to 1999, and for both, their first term in office ended in a resounding defeat. A few years later, both returned to power with a deeper understanding of their respective political systems and many personal grievances. For Netanyahu, the primary lesson from his first term was that his political survival depended on his far-right base, particularly the settlers.

Netanyahu's behavior in the international arena has thus been tailored to the preferences and interests of his far-right illiberal base. This domestic alliance has impacted Netanyahu's relationship with Israel's closest ally, the U.S., his choice of international allies more broadly, and even his security approach toward Hamas. In addition, to avoid internal competition, Netanyahu captured the Likud party and populated it with cronies. This impacted the overall quality of governance, including in foreign policy. Since the unprecedentedly large and successful terrorist attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, the costs of his actions have become increasingly evident, but have not changed Netanyahu's international behavior.

39 Julian G. Waller, "Mimicking the Mad Printer: Legislating Illiberalism in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 3 (May 2023): 225–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1960863>; Marlies Glasius, Jelmer Schalk, and Meta De Lange, "Illiberal Norm Diffusion: How Do Governments Learn to Restrict Nongovernmental Organizations?" *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (June 2020): 453–468. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa019>.

40 Carlo Martuscelli, Camille Gijs, and Pieter Haeck, "Hungary Is Flirting with China—at What Cost to the EU?" *Politico*, June 25, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-flirt-china-cost-eu-trade-foreign-direct-investment/>.

41 Patrick Müller and David Gazsi, "Populist Capture of Foreign Policy Institutions: The Orbán Government and the De-Europeanization of Hungarian Foreign Policy," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61, no. 2 (March 2023): 397–415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13377>.

Illiberalism and U.S.-Israeli Relations

While becoming the longest-serving prime minister in Israeli history, Netanyahu has sought to portray himself as a great statesman, determined to boost Israel's international standing through his experience, masterful oratory skills, and unmatched interpersonal connections. In reality, Netanyahu has been very unpopular with most U.S. presidential administrations, generating an increasingly strained relationship. This is a crucial issue as the U.S. is an existential ally—it provides Israel with significant security aid; sells arms and ammunition to Israel; and provides diplomatic protection, especially by vetoing UN Security Council resolutions on Israel.

During his 1996 to 1999 term in office, Netanyahu's delay tactics in the peace negotiations with Palestinians and his brash and arrogant style aggravated the Clinton Administration and later the George W. Bush Administration.⁴² In one interview, former George H. W. Bush Secretary of State James Baker revealed that he banned Netanyahu from visiting the State Department.⁴³

Netanyahu's strained relationship with the Obama Administration was more public. Barack Obama deeply distrusted Netanyahu, especially regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. The sentiment was captured in a private conversation between Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, caught on tape, in which both leaders expressed annoyance with Netanyahu's dishonesty.⁴⁴ The Obama Administration subsequently viewed Netanyahu as openly supporting its opposition candidate, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, in the 2012 presidential election.⁴⁵

The most significant rift between Netanyahu and the Obama Administration was precipitated by Netanyahu's public support of the Republican Party. In 2015, Netanyahu accepted the invitation of House Speaker John Boehner to address the US Congress. The invitation was political—Republicans invited Netanyahu without informing the White House, counting on Netanyahu to attack the Obama-brokered Iran Nuclear Deal. Netanyahu acted as a Republican political agent, infuriating the White House and the Democratic Party. Democratic Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, then House Minority Leader and a supporter of Israel, strongly criticized the speech, noting, "I was near tears throughout the prime minister's speech—saddened by the insult to the intelligence of the United States."⁴⁶ Moreover, the speech was held just two weeks before the Israeli elections and was a part of Netanyahu's campaign, demonstrating his international prowess. By accepting the invitation to speak, Netanyahu politicized Israel in the US, risking the long-term bipartisan support Israel relies on.

The Obama Administration's frustration with Netanyahu on the settlement issue led to a rare US abstention in a vote on the legality of settlements in the UN Security Council.⁴⁷ Explaining the reasoning behind the vote, US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power noted that "The Israeli Prime Minister recently described his government as 'more committed to settlements than any in Israel's history,' and one of his leading coalition partners recently declared that 'the era of the two-state solution

42 Thomas L. Friedman, "Who Is Bibi?," *New York Times*, May 19, 1998, Foreign Affairs, Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/19/opinion/foreign-affairs-who-is-bibi.html>.

43 Bernie Becker, "I Barred Netanyahu from State Dept., Baker Says," *The Hill*, November 2, 2014, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/222577-james-baker-i-barred-netanyahu-from-state-dept/>.

44 "Sarkuzi, Obama Bemoan Netanyahu over Open Mic," CNN, November 8, 2011, <https://www.cnn.com/2011/11/08/world/europe/france-sarkozy-netanyahu/index.html>.

45 Harriet Sherwood, "Binyamin Netanyahu Gambles on Mitt Romney Victory," *Guardian*, September 20, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/20/binyamin-netanyahu-gambles-on-mitt-romney>.

46 Lauren French, "Pelosi: Netanyahu Speech 'Insulting to the Intelligence of the United States,'" *Politico*, March 3, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/nancy-pelosi-benjamin-netanyahu-speech-react-115701>.

47 Resolution 2334 2016 UNSC.

is over.’ At the same time, the Prime Minister has said that he is still committed to pursuing a two-state solution. But these statements are irreconcilable.”⁴⁸

To ease American pressure to halt construction in the settlements and negotiate with Palestinians, Netanyahu also courted the support of the evangelical Christian community in the US. Traditionally, Israel’s strongest support from within a single demographic group in the US comes from diaspora Jews. Since the Jewish community in the US leans liberal, Netanyahu sought different and less traditional allies. Prioritizing the relationship with evangelicals was another politically-charged move that alienated the American Jewish community and further undermined bipartisan support. Indeed, in recent years, younger Jews are less supportive of Israel than are their parents,⁴⁹ in part because of Israel’s domestic right-wing shift.

Although Netanyahu enjoyed a relatively productive relationship with the Trump Administration (as discussed below), his relationship with the Biden Administration has been contentious. Netanyahu’s current administration is the most far-right government in Israel’s history.⁵⁰ Netanyahu was briefly ousted in 2021, after he was indicted on several corruption charges.⁵¹ To regain power and avoid his legal woes, Netanyahu allied with and legitimized the most radical right-wing groups in Israel, in particular the head of the ultranationalist faction, Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), Itamar ben Gvir. Netanyahu became the left-wing marker of his coalition, and it is often unclear if he is in control of his coalition partners or led in increasingly illiberal directions. The Biden Administration and other liberal actors expressed concerns about the composition of the government, especially as it unveiled radical plans to curtail the rule of law and significantly undermine the judiciary.⁵² Breaking with tradition, after the Israeli elections Biden did not invite Netanyahu to the White House, and they met only once before October 7, 2023, on the sidelines of the United Nations 2023 Annual Summit.

In response to Biden’s snub, Netanyahu’s illiberal coalition members and other influential media figures criticized Biden on Channel 14, the TV news channel associated with Netanyahu and the far right. They repeated Trump’s unfounded conspiracy theory that the 2020 US presidential elections were rigged, that Biden did not win, and several journalists questioned Biden’s fitness for office.⁵³ The Minister of Diaspora Affairs, Amichai Chikli, called on the Biden Administration not to intervene in Israel’s domestic affairs, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eli Cohen, suggested that Vice President Kamala Harris criticized the judicial reforms in Israel without reading them, stating: “If you ask her what about the reform troubles her, she wouldn’t be able to name one clause that bothers her”⁵⁴. These actions were harmful to the US-

48 “Full Text of US Envoy Samantha Power’s Speech after Abstention on Anti-Settlement Vote,” *Times of Israel*, December 24, 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-us-envoy-samantha-powers-speech-after-abstention-on-anti-settlement-vote/>.

49 Jordan Muchnick and Elaine Kamarack, “The Generation Gap in Opinions toward Israel” (Brookings, November 9, 2023), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-generation-gap-in-opinions-toward-israel/>.

50 Jonathan Lis, “Netanyahu’s Government, the Most Right-Wing in Israel’s History, Takes Office,” *Haaretz*, December 28, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-12-28/ty-article-live/far-right-finance-minister-will-also-be-in-charge-of-west-bank/0000185-5865-d6a2-adf5-79e5d1c50000>.

51 By 2019, Netanyahu had become an increasingly polarizing leader, especially after his indictments. Israel held five election cycles from 2019 to 2022, struggling to form a stable government. From 2021 to 2022, a coalition government was formed based on opposition to Netanyahu’s leadership. It included an array of ideologically disparate parties, a fact that contributed to its early demise.

52 Matt Spetalnick, “US Chides Israel over Judicial Overhaul Law after Lawmakers Defy Biden,” Reuters, July 24, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-calls-israel-parliament-vote-unfortunate-urges-work-toward-consensus-2023-07-24/>.

53 “Yinon Magal Tokef: “Biden Buba Shel Ha’Ulra Smola’nim Be’Arhav [Hebrew],” *Israel HaBoker* (Maariv, March 29, 2023), <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/Article-991818>.

54 Amir Tibon, “She Didn’t Even Read It’: Israel’s Foreign Minister Fires Back at Kamala Harris over Judicial Overhaul,” *Haaretz*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-06-07/ty-article/israels-foreign-minister-fires-back-at-kamala-harris-over-judicial-overhaul/00000188-9487-d3a7-adcf-b58f0b120000>.

Israeli relationship, and they exemplified a broader decline in professional diplomacy under Netanyahu.

The desire to avoid critique and intervention on the settlement issue guided Netanyahu's relationship with the European Union as well.⁵⁵ The EU has been more forceful in its critique of Israeli occupation and the Jewish settlements. This critique was expressed in an agenda of "differentiation"—a separate treatment for the settlements and for Israeli pre-1967 territories (recognized by the international community as part of the state of Israel). Netanyahu strongly opposed such policies, and his policies vis-à-vis Europe can be viewed as a direct result of this protection of the Jewish settlements. Most notably, as we elaborate below, Israel under Netanyahu prioritized bilateral relationships with populist-led countries. The intention was to gain enough allies to undermine broader EU sanctions related to the settlements. Indeed, Israel relies on the votes of Hungary and Austria (and previously Poland under the Law and Justice [PiS] government, as well as that of the Czech Republic) in the EU to water down a strict stance on this issue. Though trade relations remain strong, Israel's tactic has frustrated the EU, resulting in a curtailment of further trade, culture, and academic cooperation.⁵⁶

Though the majority of European censure is focused on the occupation and Jewish settlements, liberal European allies also expressed concern over Netanyahu's judicial reform. French President Emmanuel Macron, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola warned that Europe would have to reconsider its relationship with Israel if the state no longer shares the values of liberal democracy.⁵⁷

After October 7, the tensions between the West and Israel under Netanyahu took on immediate and existential importance. As we explore below, even when there was a significant conflict between the stability of Israel's foreign alliances and Netanyahu's domestic illiberal agenda, the illiberal agenda prevailed. Netanyahu prioritized appeasing his far-right factions to maintain his grip on power even at the expense of Israeli security.

Netanyahu's Illiberal Allies

Netanyahu actively cultivates relationships with counterpart illiberal leaders. These relationships are not based on a shared worldview of democracy and human rights but champion the principles of state sovereignty and the protection of national identity. Illiberal leaders are unlikely to criticize Israel's policies toward the Palestinians, or its curtailing of liberal institutions like the Supreme Court.

Netanyahu's Likud party formed close ties with far-right parties with antisemitic or Nazi backgrounds that were officially boycotted by the state of Israel, including the Sweden Democrats and the Holocaust-denying far-right Romanian party, Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (Alliance for the Union of all Romanians: AUR). Likud even took steps to end the boycott of AUR.⁵⁸ Likud formed an even closer bond with

55 Guy Harpaz, "EU-Israel Relations: Netanyahu's Legacy," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, no. 4 (December 1, 2022), <https://kluwerlawonline.com/api/Product/CitationPDFURL?file=Journals\EERR\EERR2022034.pdf>.

56 Maya Sion-Tzidkiyah, "Ha'Asor Ha'Avud: Yechasei Israel Ve'Ha'Tchud Ha'Eropi 2010–2020 [Hebrew]" (Mitvim, October 2021), <https://mitvim.org.il/publication/hebrew-the-lost-decade-israel-eu-relations-2010-2020-dr-maya-sion-tzidkiyah/>.

57 Jonathan Lis, "EU Parliament Head Warns on Judicial Overhaul during Herzog's Holocaust Memorial Visit," *Haaretz*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-01-26/ty-article/eu-parliament-head-warns-on-judicial-overhaul-during-herzogs-holocaust-memorial-visit/0000185-ee1f-d21e-ade5-ee5f1f090000>; Rina Bassist, "World Leaders' Rejection of Israel's Judicial Reform Is a Reason to Worry," *Jerusalem Post*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-734594>.

58 Amir Tibon and Noa Shpigel, "Chak Me'Ha'Likus Yazam Diun Be'Misrad Ha'Chuz al Hitkarvut le'Miflagot Yamin Kitzoni Be'Europa [Hebrew]," *Haaretz*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2023-08-03/ty-article/premium/0000189-bb56-d20c-addf-fbd694560000>.

PiS in Poland and the ruling Fidesz party in Hungary, two parties who are rewriting their countries' histories and denouncing any responsibility of society or the state for the murder of Jews in the Holocaust. Likud's ties with Fidesz are especially close, and the two parties participate in joint conferences and share political advisors and campaign and governance strategies.⁵⁹ In 2019, Viktor Orbán visited Israel, where the two leaders lauded their friendship and made statements about joint values—animosity toward international institutions, a shared anti-Islam and anti-immigration agenda, and economic cooperation.⁶⁰

Netanyahu also formed close ties with illiberal leaders beyond Europe. He participated in Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's inauguration alongside illiberal leaders from around the globe. Bolsonaro visited Israel shortly thereafter, and Brazil then opened a new trade office in Jerusalem.⁶¹ Netanyahu has also been close to Modi, and the leaders have made reciprocal state visits in the last few years.

Netanyahu invested special effort in his relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Over the last decade, the two have met at least 10 times.⁶² Netanyahu has called Putin every year to congratulate him on his birthday, a practice common in some former Soviet countries, but less so in the West. Israel also did not take a clear position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, despite the Iranian involvement in the war and US diplomatic efforts to pull Israel firmly over to the primarily Western-led alliance in support of Ukraine. This neutrality agenda continued during the year-and-a-half Netanyahu was out of office, from June 2021 to December 2022. The justification was that Israel should continue to appease Russia so that Russia would allow it to operate against the Iranian presence in Syria.

Another illiberal relationship Netanyahu cultivated was with US President Donald Trump. Netanyahu was an ally of Trump's and credited their alliance for Trump's internationally controversial decision to move the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and for the Abraham Accords, which established bilateral diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab countries: the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. In 2019, Netanyahu released a billboard campaign that displayed him shaking hands with Trump and Putin with the caption, "Netanyahu—A Different League."⁶³

Finally, in recent years, Netanyahu has supported significant Chinese investments in infrastructure projects in Israel. This has led the head of the Israel Security Agency (Shin Beit), Nadav Argaman, and the US to warn of the security threat of growing Chinese ownership.⁶⁴ Netanyahu himself has tried to cultivate a closer diplomatic relationship with Beijing. In 2023, after the Biden Administration snubbed Netanyahu because of his far-right and illiberal government, Netanyahu announced plans to meet Xi Jinping in Beijing and posed with a copy of Xi's book, *The Governance of China*.⁶⁵

59 Lahav Harkov, "Likud Official Provided Intel for Hungarian Anti-Soros Campaign," *Jerusalem Post*, December 18, 2017, Israel News, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/likud-official-provided-intel-for-hungarian-anti-soros-campaign-518384>.

60 "PM Netanyahu Meets with Hungarian PM Viktor Orban Prime Minister's Office," Israeli Government, Prime Minister's Office website, February 19, 2019, https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event_hungary190219.

61 "Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro Is Visiting Israel," Israeli Government, Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, March 31, 2019, https://www.gov.il/he/pages/brazilian_president_visits_israel.

62 Anshel Pfeffer, "Opinion: Why Netanyahu Is Suddenly a Lot Less Friendly with Putin," CNN, February 7, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/07/opinions/netanyahu-putin-israel-russia-ukraine-pfeffer/index.html>.

63 Ruth Margalit, "Benjamin Netanyahu's Two Decades of Power, Bluster and Ego," *New York Times*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/27/magazine/benjamin-netanyahu-israel.html>.

64 Lior Gutmann, "Tzir Beijing-Cambodia-Haifa Mad'ig et Ha'Shabak [Hebrew]," *Calcalist*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.calcalist.co.il/markets/articles/0.7340.L-3771703.00.html>.

65 The planned meeting did not take place, due to the onset of the war following the October 7 attacks.

The policy of seeking alliances beyond the West has been directly tied to the goal of legitimizing and normalizing the settlement project. This was explicitly stated by Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked's "Plan for National Strength" in 2017, which stated that Israel must strengthen its hold on the occupied territories by embarking on massive construction and development of Jewish settlements. Moreover, according to the plan, Israel needs to openly declare its intentions to the world and try to move more international embassies to Jerusalem. The minister argued that this plan would not harm Israel's international standing if Israel allied with states like Russia, India, and China, which also prioritize state sovereignty and national identity and actively fight Islamic terrorism.⁶⁶

Israel was not sanctioned by the international community in any significant way as a result of Netanyahu's domestic and international illiberal turn. However, after October 7, Israel's security dependence on Western allies and the futility of its illiberal ties became immediately evident.

Strengthening Hamas

Since October 7, 2023, Israel's approach towards Hamas during Netanyahu's term has been continually re-examined. Following Israel's unilateral retreat from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Hamas won the most votes in the Palestinian legislative elections and seized power in Gaza. In the years that followed, Hamas targeted Israel with missiles, and Israel imposed intermittent blockades and attacks. From December 2008 to January 2009, within the context of the Annapolis peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (PA), Israel executed an extensive military operation in Gaza designed to weaken the Hamas government. The Israeli government hoped that the PA would instead regain control over Gaza. The operation was widely condemned internationally due to the high death toll in Gaza.⁶⁷ The 22-day war did not eliminate Hamas, and the PA did not overthrow Hamas in Gaza.

Netanyahu ran for office in 2009 on the promise of eliminating Hamas in Gaza. Instead, his policies entrenched Hamas. Netanyahu's agenda aimed to avoid a peace process he regarded as dangerous and mistaken, and one that the far-right base strongly opposed. Once installed in office, he halted peace talks and has not held working meetings with the chairman of the PA since 2010. As part of this agenda, Netanyahu sought to prevent a process of West Bank-Gaza unification under the PA that his predecessor wished to establish. To do so, he sustained Hamas in Gaza despite ongoing and persistent Hamas attacks on the towns around the Gaza Strip. In 2011, Israel struck a deal with Hamas to release 1,027 prisoners in exchange for an Israeli soldier, held hostage in Gaza.⁶⁸ This deal established Hamas as the champion of Palestinians on the important issue of security prisoners held in Israel. The head of Hamas in Gaza, and the leading force behind the October 7 massacre, Yahya Sinwar, was among those freed in the deal. Israel went on to attack Gaza periodically to "trim" Hamas' abilities, but it also transferred Qatari funds directly to Hamas and eased the restrictions on Gaza as rewards for ceasefires. At the same time, Israel significantly reduced cooperation with moderate forces in the PA.⁶⁹

Over time, the idea that the PA was not a partner for peace and that the conflict should be managed rather than resolved became common in mainstream Israeli politics. However, some still warned of the great danger of Netanyahu's agenda. In 2013, former head of the Israel Security Agency Yuval Diskin warned that by

66 "Shaked Presents 5 Point Plan for National Strength," Arutz Sheva (media network website), January 24, 2017, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/223803>.

67 "Gaza Crisis: Toll of Operations in Gaza," BBC News, July 25, 2014, Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28439404>.

68 Ben Quinn, "Gilad Shalit Freed in Exchange for Palestinian Prisoners," *Guardian*, October 18, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/18/gilad-shalit-palestine-prisoners-freed>.

69 Aluf Benn, "Israel's Self-Destruction: Netanyahu, the Palestinians, and the Price of Neglect," *Foreign Affairs* 103 (March/April 2024), 44, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/israels-netanyahu-self-destruction>.

continuously weakening the PA and its chairman, Mahmoud Abbas, Netanyahu was actually strengthening Hamas.⁷⁰ Radical settlers, on the other hand, hailed the policy. In 2015, the then MP of the far-right religious party Haba'it Ha'Yehudi (The Jewish Home), Bezalel Smotrich, discussed Hamas in an interview, calling the Palestinian Authority a burden and Hamas an asset.⁷¹ According to his analysis, because Hamas is a discredited terrorist organization, the international community will not recognize Palestine as long as Hamas is in power, unlike the Fatah-governed Palestinian Authority. Thus, in Smotrich's and the far right's view, Hamas staying in power was in Israel's interest.

October 7 and the Failure of Illiberal Ties

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched an unprecedented attack on Israel, killing approximately 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals in one day and taking more than 240 Israelis hostage.⁷² Despite Netanyahu's strained relationship with the US and other traditional liberal allies, these states immediately expressed rhetorical support and provided material assistance to Israel.

In contrast, the illiberal states with whom Netanyahu had cultivated relationships were less supportive. Putin, and to a lesser extent Xi, expressed support for Hamas.⁷³ For Putin, this was an opportunity to condemn American imperialism, one of his foundational narratives. He immediately blamed the massacre on failed US policy in the Middle East and invited a Hamas delegation to Moscow. Russia is also a close ally of Iran, which provides arms to Russia for its war in Ukraine, collaborates with Russia on military strategy in the Middle East, and shares the anti-American worldview. China views both Russia and Iran as important strategic allies and is in fierce international competition with the US. Donald Trump, who was insulted when Netanyahu congratulated Biden on the latter's election win in November 2020, responded to the October 7, 2023, attacks by slighting the Israeli military and praising the capabilities of Hezbollah.⁷⁴ Putin and Xi's responses demonstrate that connections between illiberals are ephemeral and transactional. Ultimately, in terms of its geopolitical characteristics, Israel does not belong to the illiberal bloc, while it can either be a welcome or an unwelcome actor in the Western liberal bloc. As for Trump, though radical-right actors in Israel still view him as a close ally, he is erratic and self-interested both in the domestic and international arenas.

Despite strong security incentives for reinforcing Israel's ties to the Western liberal alliance, Netanyahu did not alter his illiberal course after October 7. Most notably, parliament members of the ruling coalition and government ministers continue to express extremist, hardline views. In the context of the Israel-Hamas War, some of them have expressed support for ethnic cleansing and other forms of war crimes.⁷⁵ Moreover, despite US pressure, members of Netanyahu's coalition have continued to incite violence in the West Bank, risking an escalation of violence and the loss of international support.

70 "Misconception 2: Building Up Hamas," Conception 2023 (website collaboration between the Berl Katznelson Center, the Molad Center for the Renewal of Israeli Democracy, and *Telem* [journal]), 2024, <https://www.conception2023.co.il/concep2/>.

71 Milan Czerny and Dan Storyev: "רו"ע ארזת חא'נזסז-בזלזל סמורח: 'רוא ב"א חאמאס זאלצב - תסנה זורע" Arutz Ha'Knesset-Bezalel Smotrich: "Ro'e Be'Abu Mazen Netel U'Va' Hamas Neches" [Hebrew], YouTube, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB16PMEPuiM>.

72 "Israel Social Security Data Reveals True Picture of Oct 7 Deaths," France 24, December 15, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231215-israel-social-security-data-reveals-true-picture-of-oct-7-deaths>.

73 Milan Czerny and Dan Storyev, "Why Russia and Hamas Are Growing Closer," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 25, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90841>.

74 Maegan Vazquez, "Trump Doubles Down on Calling Hezbollah 'Very Smart,'" *Washington Post*, October 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/10/27/trump-hezbollah-very-smart/>.

75 Ishaan Tharoor, "Israeli Calls for Gaza's Ethnic Cleansing Are Only Getting Louder," *Washington Post*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/01/05/wy-israel-hamas/>.

These actions have been extremely costly: Israel now faces charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice.⁷⁶ This is a result of the extremely high death toll and physical damage in Gaza, but much of the legal case against Israel is based on the rhetoric of Netanyahu's allies. Israel has also lost public support within the West, especially among young people.⁷⁷ Again, the war itself is the main cause, but Netanyahu's illiberal extremist government is another central factor. Most importantly, the alliance between Israel and the US is on shaky ground. President Biden, a staunch supporter of Israel, has threatened to halt weapon shipments to Israel. In another sign of a serious rift, Netanyahu has accused the Biden Administration of significantly reducing arms shipments to Israel.⁷⁸ This is an existential concern, as Israel is also facing an immediate threat from Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Netanyahu himself remains mostly silent in response to the extremist actions of his coalition partners and even those by members of his own party (although domestically he does continue to partake in attacks on left-wing rivals, including protesters and families of hostages that are affiliated with the center-left). The most straightforward explanation for Netanyahu's puzzling behavior is that he seeks to stay in power by any means necessary. He has lost much of his domestic support,⁷⁹ and he requires the ongoing support of his extremist coalition in order to survive politically. This makes his time horizon very short, and as a result, Israel's long-term interests hardly factor into his calculations.

Arguably, Netanyahu's hands are also tied by his own narratives. Netanyahu has been promising his supporters "a total victory"⁸⁰ over Hamas. Though according to experts, and even the military itself, this is an unspecified and unrealistic outcome, the radical media associated with Netanyahu is now committed to this slogan. Netanyahu has also promised to block the PA from taking on governing responsibilities in Gaza, leaving him with no viable solutions to replace the Hamas government in Gaza.

Another possible contributing factor in Israel's increasingly costly foreign policy is the deterioration of the civil service. Under Netanyahu, the civil service has been de-professionalized in favor of a more corrupt, clientelist, and ideological personnel, resulting in incompetence and dysfunction.⁸¹ The chaos that followed the October 7 attacks demonstrated the levels of state incompetence. Experts estimate that the diplomatic bureaucracy in Israel is on the verge of collapse due to funding issues and poor management.⁸²

Conclusions

Orbán and Netanyahu's illiberal domestic policies have led to serious threats to their respective countries' prosperity and security. Although it is too soon to say if their actions will have consequences beyond the risks they have already incurred, the mere discussion of Article 7 proceedings against Hungary and the degradation of Israel's

76 Raffi Berg, "What Is South Africa's Genocide Case against Israel at the ICJ?" BBC, May 24, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67922346>.

77 Muchnick and Kamarack, "The Generation Gap in Opinions toward Israel."

78 Dov Lieber and Shayndi Raice, "Netanyahu Complains of 'Dramatic Drop' in U.S. Arms Shipments to Israel," *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-complains-of-dramatic-drop-in-u-s-arms-shipments-to-israel-af65138f>.

79 Shani Rozanes, "Support for Israeli PM Netanyahu Continues to Decline," Deutsche Welle, December 27, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/support-for-israeli-pm-netanyahu-continues-to-decline/video-67830364>.

80 Ishaan Tharoor, "Netanyahu's Delusional, Deadly Quest for 'Total Victory,'" *Washington Post*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/09/netanyahu-israel-total-victory-hamas-palestine/>.

81 Chen Agari, "Eifo Ha'Meshilut Shelachem [Hebrew]," The 7th EYE (news site), October 12, 2023, <https://www.the7eye.org.il/499133>.

82 Nimrod Goren and Roei Kibrik, "Ha'Reforma Shel Katz Eina Ha'nuscha Ha'Nechona Le'Tikun Misrad Ha'chutza [Hebrew]," *Haaretz*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/blogs/mitvim/2019-07-17/ty-article/0000017f-f8c0-d47e-a37f-f0fc33050000>.

relationship with the US are problematic. Hungary relies on the European Union for significant funding and on NATO for its security, and the US is Israel's security patron. Risking these relationships is the direct result of the attempt to hold on to domestic power through illiberal policies tailored to the respective governments' bases of supporters above all else. For the most part, illiberal domestic consolidation strategies do not affect the direction of a state's foreign policy, but the cases above demonstrate how these domestic strategies can lead to miscalculation and overreach that can risk the state's core interests.

Our analysis demonstrates that while illiberals still cooperate to some extent with liberal international institutions and alliances, they are increasingly disruptive actors. This behavior is partly rooted in domestic factors. Illiberals often promote nationalist narratives, which can constrain them to isolationist and non-cooperative courses of action. They also legitimize extremist actors who pull them in increasingly illiberal directions. Additionally, illiberals erode the decision-making environment and civil service by replacing professional civil servants with ideologically-driven loyalists. This undermines the effectiveness of governance, including in the diplomatic service.

There are also significant international factors contributing to the emboldened behavior of illiberals. First, Russia and China have been strategically investing in relationships that counter the influence of the Western alliance, providing illiberals with support beyond the West and reducing their dependency on Western incentives to cooperate. Second, the number of illiberal leaders is increasing, and this trend could accelerate, especially considering the pivotal election year of 2024. As more illiberals gain power, there is a growing diffusion of strategies to consolidate power, undermine democratic institutions, and resist external pressures.

Finally, our cases demonstrate the weaknesses of the liberal West in responding to disruptive actors on the international stage. Instead of implementing decisive measures, there has been a tendency to resort to economic aid or political concessions to gain cooperation from illiberal leaders. These tactics often further embolden illiberal actors. In order for it to be maintained, the international liberal order requires a more decisive and coordinated response from states that have promoted its ideals. The possibility of such a response depends heavily on the staying power of liberal-democratic leaders, even in established democracies, which is far from guaranteed. This uncertainty makes it challenging to produce an effective defense against international illiberalism.