

**Two Sides of the Same Coin: Il/liberal Projects of Ethnic
Homogeneity against Shrinking Populations**

by

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Abstract

Persistent demographic trends of low fertility rates and emigration patterns have led to declining populations in developed countries, posing biopolitical questions for states regarding the demographic composition of their countries and subsequent methods of population control. How states address the phenomenon of their shrinking populations varies across the globe based on governments' political ideologies and stances on issues such as family, gender, migration, and individual autonomy. However, states' approaches to demographic policy are complicated by their larger international projects and ideological standings amidst changing values and norms. This research then focuses on the relationship between a states' ideological position in the international system and its discourse surrounding domestic demographic policy – centering cases of countries' population decline as an investigative area of discursive research.

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INTRODUCTION

Following a century imbued by neo-Malthusian fears of a global overpopulation catastrophe, a pessimistic view that unchecked population growth will lead to a population ‘crisis,’ the 21st century discourse on demographic crises has shifted to determining population decline as the most immediate challenge for developed countries.¹ The existential fear of depopulation, which is caused by a combination of sub-replacement fertility rates, or the reproductive rate of less than 2.1 births per women needed to sustain the population size, and emigration patterns, is bolstered by prospective shrinkages of the labor force and subsequent projections of long-term economic instability. Accordingly, the renewed interest in population control has led to surges of contentious political discourse surrounding family, gender, race, migration, and sexuality as well as a sharp rise in demographic policies.

Meanwhile, in contemporary global politics, the US-led (neo)liberal order that has normatively shaped global politics since the end of the Cold War is changing according to new international tensions and diverging ideological frameworks. The rise of authoritative powers such as Russia and China as well as the emergence of ‘illiberal’ governments throughout Europe and the United States have called into question the dominance of the rules-based set of practices and norms upholding liberal democracy as the cornerstone of global politics; resonating with what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe describe as, in advancing Gramsci’s notion of ‘cultural hegemony,’ a struggle for ideological dominance.² Consequently, governments across the world often approach their political projects by either reproducing or resisting the dominant discourse of what is termed by scholars of International Relations as the

¹ See Nicholas Eberstadt, “The Demographic Future: What Population Grow – and Decline – Means for the Global Economy,” *Foreign Affairs* 89 no. 6 (November/December 2010).

² UNSW Learning, “Laclau and Mouffe,” *Youtube* video, 15:27, May 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tstkq9JCKqE>.

‘liberal international order’ (LIO); most broadly understood by its bedrock values of economic interdependence, multilateralism, democracy, and universal human rights.

In consideration of this shifting character of the LIO, this project is an exploration of governments’ political-ideological attitudes toward the contemporary phenomenon of states’ declining populations. I am specifically interested in how states with the same demographic project – but contrasting relationships to the LIO – respond to their population decline via policy and political discourse. By looking at the shrinking countries of Hungary and Japan, which share politically embedded values of ethnic homogeneity but largely differ regarding their participation in the LIO, *I aim to uncover the ways in which a state’s position in the international system interacts with their domestic demographic policy*. By looking at both the discourse of highly symbolic figures such as heads of state and the actual policies implemented as a response to population decline, I will analyze the underlying ideologies embedded within their political discourse.

The remainder of this introduction offers further contextualization for my research – compartmentalized into five thematic sections. I first briefly expand on the significance of demographic crises and their situatedness in international politics. I then clarify how my research necessitates an understanding of liberal hegemony and international order. Then, with more depth, I explain my case selection of Hungary and Japan, offering some background on both countries. This is followed by an overview of the relevant literature and, finally, my methodological and theoretical framework.

1. The International Reverberations of Demographic ‘Crises’

Since governments’ role in civil life shifted from regulating individuals to populations in the 19th century, states’ mixed approaches to population policy have been notably tethered

to their underlying political ideologies and larger national and economic goals.³ The pronatalist⁴ and anti-Malthusian orientation of socialist states, for example, contradicted the Western movement to curb population growth in recently decolonized countries during the postwar era. Socialist states criticized ‘overpopulation’ as a capitalist concept and thus hailed non-interference regarding women’s reproduction; Western governments attributed ‘overfecundity’ in poor nations as the driving cause of global inequality and proactively tried to prevent overpopulation of the poor.⁵

The modern phenomenon of declining populations, like the 20th century concern for global overpopulation, has a polarizing effect on the political ideological debates about international society. How governments frame the population dilemma itself as well as how they voice their policy responses is profoundly implicated in their relationship to larger ideological struggles over the socioeconomic order. In this way, the political discourse surrounding population decline offers a keyhole to states’ positions amidst larger ideological debates.

The demographic ‘crisis’ of declining populations also complexifies states’ perception of their own power status, as historically population size has been recognized as a ‘critical power resource’ and thus interlinks with power relations on an international level.⁶ This is significant because depopulation then, in exacerbating a perceived weakening of international status, risks injury to national pride and bursts of cultural nationalism.⁷ As such, domestic policies to influence a state’s population size and composition require a broader analysis which

³ Rickie Solinger and Mie Nakachi, *Reproductive States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴ The term ‘pronatalist’ is often referred to in various literatures as ‘natalist’ or ‘neonatalist’.

⁵ Ibid, 5.

⁶ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success In World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 4.

⁷ John C. Caldwell, Pat Caldwell, and Peter McDonald, “Policy Responses to Low Fertility and its Consequences: A Global Survey,” *Journal of Population Research* 19 no. 1 (2002), 6.

likewise considers the implications this size may have on (perceived) international standing and influence.

2. *The Hegemony of the Liberal International Order*

As previously stated, the LIO – though still a somewhat contested notion regarding its ultimate role and meaning – is widely considered to describe the ‘liberal’⁸ values, norms, and institutions that have expanded since the end of the Cold War.⁹ The LIO is also described by some as ‘liberal hegemony,’ implying that the ideological and cultural values driving the LIO hold a position of dominance and power. In the eyes of some governments, however, the LIO is more so an “ideological agenda to protect the interests of the West.”¹⁰ This clash of ideas about world order highlights the relationship between political ideology and power relations internationally and characterizes the ideological struggles between liberal and non-liberal seen today in contemporary global politics.

Scholars within the IR discipline thus refer to the LIO as something that is ‘dying’ due to the prevalence of governments which openly speak out against its key principles.¹¹ Yet, states’ level of engagement with the values and norms of the LIO is inconsistent. Governments evidently revoke some tenets of the LIO while upholding others. As such, states’ responses to population decline are confounded by their rejection of or compliance with varying facets of liberal values and norms; including their approach to issues such as human and civil rights; equality paradigms of gender, race, and sexuality; traditionalism and modernism; borders and

⁸ By ‘liberal,’ in this paper, I lean on an understanding of political liberalism rather than economic – though both are embedded in the LIO.

⁹ See Yoichi Funabashi and John Ikenberry, ed., *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 16 and Hans Kundnani, “What is the Liberal International Order?” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States* no. 17 (2017), 1.

¹⁰ Funabashi and Ikenberry, *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order*, 16.

¹¹ Stewart M. Patrick, “The Liberal World Order is Dying. What Comes Next?” *World Politics Review* (Jan 15, 2019) <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/27192/the-liberal-world-order-is-dying-what-comes-next>.

free movement; and diversity and multiculturalism. In then examining the political discourse of the Hungarian and Japanese governments, my analysis focuses on the ways in which their approach to the demographic situation is articulated in adherence to or retaliation of liberal norms. In this way, I bring to light the nuanced ways in which states are negotiating, interpreting, and utilizing liberal hegemonic ideas and narratives.

3. *Case Selection: Hungary and Japan*

Low fertility rates are increasingly prevalent among most developed countries, but less common are developed states which have already reached their population ‘peak’ and are currently in the process of depopulation. Hungary and Japan are two of the few states which have already reached their population ‘peak’ due to a combination of decades of sub-replacement fertility rates and flows of emigration. Hungary has lost about a million people since the country hit its peak of about 10.71 million people in 1980.¹² Japan has also lost about a million people since reaching its population peak in 2008 of 128 million.¹³ The states serve as unique case studies of countries experiencing sub-replacement fertility rates as they are both widely commented on by the international community for their approaches to demographic policy, regarding both their exclusionary attitudes toward immigration and their state initiatives to increase birth rates.¹⁴

¹² “Hungary Population 2020 (Live),” World Population Review, accessed May 23, 2020, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/hungary-population/>.

¹³ Shiro Armstrong, “The Consequences of Japan’s Shrinking,” *Australia and Japan in the Region* 4 no. 5 (2016) <https://crawford.anu.edu.au/distribution/newsletter/ajrc/ajrc26.html>.

¹⁴ See Shaun Walker, “‘Baby Machines’: Eastern Europe’s answer to depopulation,” *The Guardian* (March 4, 2020); Kohei Usuda, “Abe’s ‘Japan First’ immigration policy,” *Japan Today* (Oct. 20, 2017); Emiko Jozuka, Jessie Yeung, and Jake Kwon, “Japan’s birth rate hits another record low in 2019,” *CNN* (Dec 30, 2019) [https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/25/asia/japan-birthrate-hnk-intl/index.html#:~:text=Japanese%20town%20paying%20couples%20to%20have%20babies%20\(2018\)&text=The%20estimated%20number%20of%20babies,of%20Health%2C%20Labour%20and%20Welfare](https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/25/asia/japan-birthrate-hnk-intl/index.html#:~:text=Japanese%20town%20paying%20couples%20to%20have%20babies%20(2018)&text=The%20estimated%20number%20of%20babies,of%20Health%2C%20Labour%20and%20Welfare).

While the economic and geopolitical positions, as well as the cultural backdrops, of Hungary and Japan markedly differ, both countries also have some unique commonalities which contribute to their comparison. The most important similarity for my case selection concerns both countries' strong presence of 'ethnonationalism,' the political sentiment based on the idea of a 'self-defined' and ethnically bound nation,¹⁵ which I will use as an umbrella term hereafter to encompass the varieties of nationalism referred to in the literature. As I will elaborate in my literature review, the bulk of the scholarship interested in political reactions to population decline invokes nationalist sentiment to describe the demographic policies which are partial to ethnic homogeneity. Thus, as both Hungary and Japan are states which have a history of placing value on ethnic homogeneity,¹⁶ resulting in practices that reflect ethnonationalist ideas, they offer valuable similarities for comparison in the case of demographic decline.

Yet, as I explained the relevancy of in the previous section, the Hungarian and Japanese political dispositions differ regarding relationship to the established global order. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, publicly stated in 2014 that he wants to build an 'illiberal democracy' and reject the dominant mode of liberal governance that has presided over post-1989 Europe. Accordingly, the FIDESZ administration has enacted some of its policies in opposition to the liberal project by way of modifying the constitution to the preference of the conservative parliamentary majority, weakening the independence of the Constitutional Court, and seizing control over media and state-owned companies¹⁷ – selectively rejecting certain

¹⁵ Daniele Conversi, *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World: Walker Connor and the Study of Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 57.

¹⁶ See "Viktor Orbán's 'Ethnically Homogeneous' Hungary," Hungarian Spectrum: Reflections on Politics, Economics, and Culture (March 2017) <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2017/03/01/viktor-orbans-ethnically-homogeneous-hungary/> and Theodore Bestor, "Contemporary Japan: Japanese Society Homogeneity," *Asian Topics: An online resource for Asian history and culture @ Columbia University* (n.d.) http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/contemp_japan/cjp_society_01.html.

¹⁷ Anton Shekhovtsov, "Is transition reversible," In *The Case of Central Europe. CASE STUDIES Transition Forum, Legatum Institute*, available online: <https://lif.blob.core.windows.net/lif/docs/default-source/publications/is-transiting-reversiblethe-case-of-central-europe-january-2016.pdf>. 2016.

liberal norms while upholding others such as its policies which establish free trade agreements with the EU.

Contrary to Hungary, Japan is often regarded as one of the modern leaders of the liberal world order by IR scholars - particularly after the election of Donald Trump in 2016.¹⁸ Yet Japan also has a nuanced approach to the established liberal norms and values. Foreign policy moves such as leading negotiations in the Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) after the United States' withdrawal, as well as ratifying the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, reflect a prominent role in the LIO. Moreover, the country's professed concern for liberal values such as human rights is reflected by its relatively generous amount of foreign aid to the Syrian refugee crisis – its contributions were second to only the United States. However, this is further complicated by the fact that the government only admitted 28 asylum seekers among 11,000 applications; this is a 99% rejection rate of asylum seekers.¹⁹ Thus, like Hungary, Japan selectively chooses which contents of the LIO suits its goals – adopting liberal trade policies that encourage the free movement of capital and resources while rejecting such liberal openness with issues of race and demographics.

By comparing these two countries, I will illuminate the different ways in which 'ethnonationalist' states with contrasting relationships to the liberal world order react to their declining populations. My analysis will offer novel insight as to how the demographic trend of population decline serves as a site of political interaction and, furthermore, how responses to population decline manifest with respect to Hungary and Japan's larger international agendas.

¹⁸ See: Jennifer Lind, "Nationalist in a Liberal Order: Why Populism Missed Japan," *Asia Pacific Review* 25 no. 1 (2018), 52 DOI: 10.1080/13439006.2018.1472867.

¹⁹ Lind, "Nationalist in a Liberal Order," 68.

4. *Existing Literature on Political Responses to Population Decline*

While population decline as a modern phenomenon has been widely commented on by contemporary political academics and journalists in the last few years, there is little scholarship within the field of International Relations looking at how such a demographic trend intersects with global politics.²⁰ The contemporary IR scholarship that does investigate shrinking populations tends to focus on the socioeconomic consequences of a contracting population pyramid – how will future societies grapple with the disbalance in labor power? And without expanding populations and a steady increase in consumption, what will happen to the capitalist economic system as we know it?²¹ My contribution to the IR purview is thus to demonstrate the relevancy of declining populations as a political issue with international reverberations.

However, my research does engage with the existing scholarship investigating the demographic policies in my selected countries. Overall, most authors concerned with political demography and the ways in which a declining population exacerbates certain political leanings are looking to Central and Eastern Europe for their research - where many national populations have already peaked.²² The critical scholarship tends to focus on states, such as Hungary, whose demographic policies opt for closed borders and aim to encourage domestically raised children through pronatalist policies – and where political leaders are acting contrary to the liberal status quo.

Central and Eastern European states experiencing depopulation thus face accusation by center left scholars for returning to ‘atavistic nationalism’ and ‘authoritarianism’ to combat

²⁰ Foreign Affairs published a series of review essays in 2019 on two books that look at population decline: *The Human Tide: How Population Shaped the Modern World* (2019) by Paul Morland and *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline* (2019) by Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson. Reviews can be found at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2019-08-12/population-bust>. Some academic scholars looking at population decline include Ivan Krastev, Myra A. Waterbury, and Attila Melegh.

²¹ See Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson, *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline* (London: Signal, 2019).

²² See scholars listed in footnote #22.

their declining populations.²³ Attila Melegh, for example, considers Hungary's 'anti-immigration' rhetoric and 'selective state-sponsored pronatalism' constitutive of its 'demographic nationalism'; what Melegh describes as "a specific form of competitive political demography aimed at controlling and developing a specific group of the 'population' who are seen as a source of economic and cultural advancement... as opposed to 'other' groups which represent danger."²⁴ Similarly, Ivan Krastev has attributed what he calls 'demographic panic' to a form of 'protectionist nationalism'; a variety of nationalism in which "people are driven to exclude others not in order to build a legitimate nation-state or to protect welfare-state benefits, but out of an existential fear of 'ethnic disappearance.'"²⁵ Krastev further understands the so-called 'illiberalism' seen in Central Europe as "an attempt to preserve the power of shrinking ethnocultural majorities in the face of population decline and increased migration."²⁶

A limited amount of scholarship looking at Central Europe, however, steps away from ethnonationalist sentiment to describe governments' political reactions to population decline and, rather, broaden the scope of their analysis to look at what larger international projects states are enmeshed in. Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Pető view Hungary's political activity as a part of a larger counter-hegemonic project contesting (neo)liberalism and struggling for cultural hegemony.²⁷ While Grzebalska and Pető's overall argument centers on the backlash to gender ideology as part of the 'illiberal transformation' in Central Europe, I consider their emphasis on Hungarian politics as opposition to liberal hegemony of acute

²³ Ivan Krastev, "Depopulation is eastern Europe's biggest problem," *Financial Times* (January 27, 2020) <https://www.ft.com/content/c5d3e0ae-36eb-11ea-ac3c-f68c10993b04>.

²⁴ Attila Melegh, "Unequal Exchanges and the Radicalization of Demographic Nationalism in Hungary," *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 2 no. 4 (2016).

²⁵ Ivan Krastev, "The Specter Haunting Europe: The Unraveling of the Post-1989 Order," *Journal of Democracy* 27 no. 4 (2016) and Myra A. Waterbury, "Populist Nationalism and the Challenges of Divided Nationhood: The Politics of Migration, Mobility, and Demography in Post-2010 Hungary," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* (January 2020), 4.

²⁶ Krastev, "Depopulation is eastern Europe's biggest problem."

²⁷ Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Peto, "The gendered modus operandi of the *illiberal* transformation in Hungary and Poland," *Women's Studies International Forum* 68 (2018) 164-172.

importance in my analysis. For, while ethnonationalist ideology is evidently intertwined with the ways in which Hungary narrates its population decline, this is not the case in the also ethnonationalist state of Japan.

My analysis consequently uses the case of Japan to side with the scholarship looking beyond ethnonationalist explanations for political behavior in Hungary; specifically, regarding the response to population decline. By tracing the differences in the ways in which Hungary and Japan narrate the ‘crisis’ of their declining populations, I will show how the discourse depends on a larger hegemonic struggle rather than, as majority of scholars state, merely the resurgence of ethnonationalist sentiment. This is not to say that I disagree with the analyses presented by the scholarship focusing on ethnonationalism and populism. Rather, my analysis simply aims to shed light on the significance of the international arena in relation to how governments confront unfavorable demographic trends.

5. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Methodology*

My approach to this discourse analysis will adhere to a poststructuralist ontology that recognizes the discursive construction of social meaning.²⁸ It is important to understand that my methodology for discourse analysis is interlinked with discourse as theory. I depend on the methodological and theoretical work by political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe who, in advancing Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, argue that meaning can never be fixed and that this enables an ongoing power struggle over the fixation of meaning.²⁹ Laclau and Mouffe suggest that social division is an inherent part of politics and that the “aim of discourse analysis is to map out the processes in which we struggle about the way in which the

²⁸ See Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 15-18.

²⁹ Marianne W Jorgensen and Louise J Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 24-25.

meaning of signs is to be fixed, and the processes by which some fixations of meaning have become so conventionalized that we think of them as natural.”³⁰

Harking back to the title of this paper, I also rely on Laclau’s idea of an ‘empty signifier,’ a ‘nodal point’ which connects a series of discursive elements in the attempt to systematically fix meaning,³¹ in my conclusive analysis. As I will expose through my case studies, the discourse on population decline functions as such a nodal point through which the struggle for ideological hegemony can be glimpsed.

Furthermore, my methodology uses a bottom-up approach that analyzes discursive connectivity throughout the discourse on population decline. Trailing the methodology for discourse analysis put forward by scholars such as Lene Hansen, who regards meaning as constructed through *processes of linking* and *processes of differentiation*,³² or Dunn and Neumann, who underscore analyzing discourse as social constructed *representations*,³³ I examine the linkages that are used to construct webs of meaning connecting to larger hegemonic struggles.

To achieve such an analysis, I look at political speeches (translated into English from their original language) that address population decline as well as policy documents and governmental sites for information regarding policy implementation. For Hungary, I primarily look at the speeches of PM Orbán at the Budapest Demographic Forums which have been a biennial event since 2015 and directly confront demographic policy and population decline. The Japanese governmental discourse on population decline is sparser and less direct than the Hungarian forums which directly center population decline as the main topic. Thus, I capture

³⁰ Ibid, 25-26.

³¹ Ibid, 50.

³² Hansen, “Security as Practice,” 19.

³³ Kevin Dunn and Iver Neumann, “Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences,” *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

a wider variety of speeches such as policy speeches, press conferences, and formal addresses at international summits to find the moments in which the prime minister discusses the country's demographic crisis.

Chapter I. Hungary's Discourse on Population Decline as Contestation of Liberal Hegemony

“Huge changes have taken place [in Europe]... These huge changes can be summed up in a single phrase... that phrase is population decline, the issue of population decline.”

– Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, 2 September 2019³⁴

Hungary's fertility rates have been declining since 1970 with a population peak of 10.71 million in 1980, making the country one of the only EU member states to already be on the decline of their total population.³⁵ While population policy was part of PM Orbán's platform when he took office in 2010, it was not until 2015, during the height of Europe's 'migration crisis,' that the looming threat of a declining population due to sub-replacement fertility rates surmounted the government's political agenda.

Advancing what has come to be known as PM Orbán's 'procreation not immigration' campaign, the Hungarian government strengthened its family support policies while simultaneously closing its borders to immigration opportunities. Such policies can be seen through, for example, the CSOK initiative introduced in 2016 which offers families €32,250 in financial support to build or purchase a home³⁶ and the coinciding construction of a border barrier in 2015 along the state's southern borders to prevent illegal immigrants from entering the country.³⁷

³⁴ Viktor Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 3rd Budapest Demographic Summit,” (speech, Budapest, September 2, 2019), <http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-3rd-budapest-demographic-summit/>.

³⁵ “Hungary – Total fertility rate,” Knoema, accessed 10 May 2020 <https://knoema.com/atlas/Hungary/topics/Demographics/Fertility/Fertility-rate> and “Hungary Population 2020 (Live),” World Population Review, accessed 10 May 2020 <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/hungary-population/>.

³⁶ Fruzsina Albert, “Measures to fight demographic decline in Hungary,” *ESPN Flash Report 2018/2019*, (European Social Policy Network, June 2018).

³⁷ “Migrant crisis: Hungary's borders leave many stranded,” *BBC*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34260071>.

The most recent pronatalist measures include the 2019 Family Protection Action Plan (FPAP), which is a set of initiatives directed at increasing fertility rates and includes seven target points addressing family leave, pregnancy and maternity, goods and services, housing, and social advantages.³⁸ Under this new set of initiatives, young couples can apply for a loan of 10 million HUF (about €28,000) which is interest-free if a child is born within 5 years of the loan application. If a second child is born, 30% of the initial loan amount is forgiven and a third child cancels the debt entirely.³⁹ Some of the government's pronatalist policies have been condemned by the EU for being 'interventionist' and 'coercive,' such as the policy which gives hospitals the right to refuse abortion services.⁴⁰

While the policies themselves are important for exposing the state's reaction to its population decline, an analysis of the articulation of the population 'crisis' itself is what reveals the government's determination to proactively contest key tenets of the liberal world order; such as the values placed on open borders, human rights, inclusive behavior, and equality. The government directly addresses such contents at its international summit, dubbed the Budapest Demographic Forum, which was established to publicly address the government's official position on its demographic policies tackling depopulation. It is through the prime minister's speeches at these summits that we may glean Hungary's master narrative of their country's population decline and the anti-liberal agenda driving their population policy.

This chapter then traces the way population decline has been framed since 2015 by the government's political discourse and locates the ostensibly anti-liberal policies generated

³⁸ Lídia Balogh, "The 'Family Protection Action Plan,'" *Flash Report 3 July 2019*, European Commission, <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/4924-hungary-the-family-protection-action-plan-pdf-106-kb>.

³⁹ "About the Family Protection Action Plan," Website of the Hungarian Government, (February 22, 2019) accessed May 26, 2020 <https://www.kormany.hu/en/news/about-the-family-protection-action-plan>.

⁴⁰ Orsolya Bajusz, "Hungarian 'women's health': stigma and coercion," *Open Democracy*, Sep 29, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/feminine-health-stigma-and-coercion-hungarian-study/> and "Abortion in Europe Status Report," Humanist Federation, May 2018, <https://humanistfederation.eu/wp-content/uploads/Abortion-Status-Report.pdf>.

through such a narrative. I first provide a general overview of the government's attitude toward and response to the issue of depopulation and how it is consistently framed within an international context. Next, I look at how population decline is articulated as a 'European' problem to enhance ideological clashes between Hungary and the EU. The third section focuses on the gendered dimension of Hungary's discourse on population decline and exposes the binary established between 'gender ideology' and the traditional notion of 'the family.' I then more deeply examine the articulation of 'family' and map how it is embedded in the anti-liberal narrative before offering a conclusion to the chapter that converses with the existing scholarship.

1. Orbán's 'Procreation not Immigration' Campaign

The dominant idea at the heart of the discourse on Hungary's population decline is what scholars and journalists aptly refer to as PM Orbán's 'procreation not immigration' campaign.⁴¹ The prime minister made the government's position clear when he announced at the first Budapest Demographic Forum in November 2015 that he envisions "a Europe which is based on families rather than immigration," creating a hierarchical dichotomy between 'family' and 'immigration.'⁴²

Such a position is made evident through the following statement by the prime minister at the 2019 "State of the Nation" address:

We are living in times when fewer and fewer children are being born throughout Europe. People in the West are responding to this with

⁴¹ For examples, see Shaun Walker, "Viktor Orbán trumpets Hungary's 'procreation, not immigration' policy," *The Guardian*, Sep 6, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/06/viktor-orban-trumpets-far-right-procreation-anti-immigration-policy> and Eszter Zimanyi, "Family b/orders: Hungary's Campaign for the 'Family Protection Action Plan,'" *Feminist Media Studies* 20 no. 2 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1720352>.

⁴² Ibid.

immigration: they say that the shortfall should be made up by immigrants, and then the numbers will be in order. Hungarians see this in a different light. We do not need numbers, but Hungarian children. In our minds, immigration means surrender. If we resign ourselves to the fact that we are unable to sustain ourselves even biologically, by doing so we admit that we are not important even for ourselves. So why would we be important for the world?⁴³

The prime minister, here, speaks about Europe's population decline in a specifically global context. He implies that biological reproduction is equated with the strength of the nation amidst a competitive map of nations, and that to not produce enough Hungarian children means to 'surrender' the Hungarian nation. Thus, the emphasis is not on the country's population decline being an existential threat of disappearance – but *replacement*.

The fear of 'replacement' by the non-European other suggests that the Hungarian government's overarching political rationale behind its discourse on population decline derives from an attitude of global competitiveness and existential angst rather than concern for national economic stability. Thus, from the way that the prime minister generally approaches the topic of population decline, the problem of Hungary's demographic trend is framed to be less of a domestic issue than it is one with international relevancy.

2. *Framing Population Decline as a 'European' Problem to Rival EU*

Values

The government strategically uses the issue of population decline to safeguard Hungarian identity as 'European' while simultaneously using its membership to criticize the EU's liberal discourse. By portraying Hungary and the EU as sharing the same existential

⁴³ Viktor Orbán, "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's 'State of the Nation' address," (speech, Budapest, February 10, 2019) <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-state-of-the-nation-address-2019>.

threat, it then provides the opportunity to comment on how the rest of Europe is handling the so-called demographic ‘crisis’ and how the EU’s mismanagement of the problem reflects its contestable values.

PM Orbán clarified from the outset of the first Budapest Demographic Forum 2015 that population decline threatens not just Hungary but the entire European “civilization,” urging that “Europe’s demographic weight in the world will continue to decrease” unless politics places stronger emphasis on “family” as “the basic unit of European culture.”⁴⁴ At the 2017 Budapest Demographic Forum, the prime minister asserted that, “the restoration of natural reproduction is a national cause; and it is not just one national cause among many, but *the* national cause. And it is also a European cause: not just one European cause among many, but *the* European cause” – emphasizing the contours of the demographic population to which Hungary belongs as, specifically, ethnically European.⁴⁵

The prime minister thus makes it clear to habitually frame Hungary’s case of population decline as a ‘European’ problem while positioning the values of the FIDESZ political party in direct opposition to those of the EU. This resonates with the prime minister’s well-voiced stance of Hungary as having ‘always been European’ and is therefore in no need of ‘Europeanization’ or ‘liberal preaching.’⁴⁶ Rather, the prime minister implies that it is Europe who has turned away from the notion of the ‘traditional’ family and, in doing so, has placed

⁴⁴ Viktor Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the Budapest Demographic Forum,” (speech, Budapest, November 9, 2015), Website of the Hungarian Government, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-budapest-demographic-forum>.

⁴⁵ Viktor Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s opening speech at the 2nd Budapest Demographic Forum,” (speech, Budapest, May 25, 2017), <http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-opening-speech-at-the-2nd-budapest-demographic-forum/>. Italics kept the same as from Hungarian website.

⁴⁶ Melegh, “Unequal Exchanges,” 88.

Hungary and the rest of the ‘Europe civilization’ at risk of ‘organized invasion’ by another demographic group.⁴⁷

Accordingly, by both framing population decline as a distinctly “European phenomenon” and publicly opposing the dominant EU liberal ideology, the prime minister narrates the threat of Europe’s depopulation so as to dispute other intersecting parts of the ‘liberal’ set of values. For example, in his 2015 speech, PM Orbán states, “the situation is that in Europe today it is not PC to talk about demographic issues... the Europe of which we were once proud... is today in such an intellectual state, has maneuvered itself into such a spiritual state, that certain words, questions and political concepts cannot even be uttered.”⁴⁸ ‘Demographic issues,’ here, is framed as a pertinent issue that is being silenced by EU liberal norms such as political correctness. By problematizing political correctness in the context of population decline, the quote also insinuates that the demographic issues that the prime minister is alluding to (both low fertility rates and immigration) are knowingly bound to discriminatory practices that misalign with the liberal values as held by the EU.

Another example of how framing population decline as ‘Europe’s’ problem (rather than just Hungary’s) aids countering the ideological values of the EU is the more direct clashing of ideas on migration. PM Orbán urges that:

There are some in Brussels who think that the immigrants flooding into Europe should be seen as a blessing, because with them we shall be able to resolve our economic and demographic problems overnight... this way of thinking is extremely dangerous. It is dangerous because it upsets the balance of the continent... it implants among us a culture and an outlook on life with a mentality and customs which are completely different from ours. This culture has a different approach to work, has different ideas about

⁴⁷ “Orbán to Pellegrini: ‘It’s forbidden to say so in Europe, but migration is an organized invasion,’” *Hungary Today* (February 13, 2020) <https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-to-pellegrini-its-forbidden-to-say-so-in-europe-but-migration-is-an-organised-invasion/>.

⁴⁸ Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech,” (2015).

human relations and, last but not least, holds different views on the foundations of our social system: the family.⁴⁹

The prime minister, here, frames Europe as embodying one cohesive cultural identity which is separate from the non-European immigrants; he symbolically unifies the ‘foundations’ of the European ‘social system’ by otherizing the ‘culture’ and ‘ideas’ of the non-European other. In the same speech, he continues to state:

We want the European Union to abandon the mentality which keeps our hands tied, and to return to the values and the politics which once made it so spectacularly successful. We want families to take centre stage in European politics once again.⁵⁰

By first otherizing non-European immigrants in a broader cultural context and then identifying the ‘family’ as the core of such a cultural clash, the prime minister frames immigrants as being not only ‘other’, but anti-family; and more importantly, this is linked to the European Union as then being anti-family. Thus, by again framing the issue of population decline within a wider context that encompasses the European continent, the prime minister disputes larger EU ideas and practices rather than just championing Hungary’s own anti-immigration policies. In other words, the Hungarian government’s discourse on immigration policy does not limit itself to its own domestic interests but is rather articulated as more of an ideological push for liberal norms – such as open borders – to be challenged on an international level.

3. *Countering ‘Gender Ideology’*

Population policy is an inherently gendered topic due to its reliance on fertility rates; which coincide with the reproductive choices of women and couples’ decision to start a family. It is for this reason that liberal values upholding gender equality do not comfortably align with

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

population policies aiming to boost fertility rates. In anticipation of criticism from liberal policymakers, PM Orbán positions his pronatalist discourse on population decline in opposition to ‘gender ideology,’ a term used by some far-right actors and religious institutions to construe ‘gender’ as an idea that threatens families, religious values, and the entirety of civilization.⁵¹

Accordingly, PM Orbán frames population decline as an under-represented topic in European politics that should be prioritized over matters such as ‘gender debates’:

The figures show that Europe’s population will decline... why is this topic so under-represented in politics and in European discourse in general? Who will live here in Europe? This is the key question here. We should talk about this seriously, and yet much more time, attention, energy, and money are being devoted to other things and to debates which have much less to do with reality: gender debates, same-sex marriage, and we could certainly mention quite a few others. These are important things which may be dear to our hearts, but they are nonetheless secondary.⁵²

The implication is that ‘gender debates’ and ‘same sex marriage’ deflect attention away from the ‘serious’ problem of population decline. In other words, for PM Orbán, the liberal appeal to civil rights such as gender equality should not be invoked with regard to demographic policies as they are ‘secondary’ to the severity of depopulation – thus framing gender issues as trivial.

Further, the prime minister seemingly appeals to the liberal paradigm for a moment by stating that gender debates and same-sex marriage are “important things which may be dear to our hearts,” yet he does not actually engage with any intricacies of the linkage between issues of gender/sex and population decline. By declaring that issues of gender/sex are ‘important’ and ‘dear’ while simultaneously jumping to the statement that they occlude discourse on

⁵¹Judith Butler, “What threat? The campaign against ‘gender ideology,’” *Glocalism journal of culture, politics, and innovation* 3 (2019) <https://doaj.org/article/74c27343eaa448acbfca52775bd47db6>, 2.

⁵²Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech,” (2015).

population decline, the prime minister bypasses having to confront details which might expose the specific ways in which the issue of population decline is intertwined with issues of gender/sex - while, at the same time, painting of a picture of his stance as one which is still sympathetic to (some) liberal values.

PM Orbán continues, after this quote to state that “there will be big problems if politics abandons the basic unit of European culture: the family.”⁵³ Like the dichotomy created between ‘family’ and ‘migration’, the prime minister also constructs a dichotomy between ‘family’ and ‘gender.’ Attention to ‘gender debates’ is equated with ‘abandonment’ of family. This construction then provides political legitimacy for ‘gender ideology’ to be seen as a threat to the family; the political effects of which can be seen by Hungary’s 2018 decree banning Gender Studies at universities or its 2020 bill ending legal recognition for trans citizens.

4. *The Articulation of ‘Family’ and Pronatalist Policies*

The concept of the ‘traditional’ family as expressed and defended by the Hungarian government permeates its political discourse on population decline. This is evident from even the synonymous naming of the ‘Budapest Demographic Forum’ with the ‘Budapest Family Summit’ in 2017. The government’s determined family support initiatives can be felt through the following statement by the prime minister:

The family is at the centre of the Hungarian government’s vision of the future. The motto of this conference is “Making Families Strong Again.” And this is right, because strong families will create a strong, competitive society and economy, a strong and competitive Hungary and Europe... Our

⁵³ Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech,” (2015).

goal... is to have as many children in Hungary as possible; because if there are children, there is a future.⁵⁴

Underlying this ‘vision’ is a biopolitical blurring between public and private lives. By linking the government’s economic goals and Hungary’s competitiveness as a nation with the bearing of Hungarian children, the biopolitical connectivity between bodies and the state is tightened. Indeed, the Hungarian speaker of parliament, Laszlo Kover, at the 2019 Budapest Demographic Summit stated straightforwardly that “having children is a public matter, not a private one.”⁵⁵ The government thus openly takes the stance that marriage, procreation, and child raising are bound to state interests. Certainly, the government’s stance that childrearing is a matter of the state contradicts the idea of autonomy as a core liberal value.⁵⁶

The 2015 Budapest Demographic Forum was also launched in tandem with its “Family-Friendly Country” project, *Családbarát Ország*, whose mission, according to their website, aims to combat individualistic values and strengthen the prioritization of family-centered policies.⁵⁷ When first introducing the project, PM Orbán explained that he wants families to feel that “not only are they doing everything they can for their country but that for its part their country is also doing everything it can for them.”⁵⁸ Again, the relationship between the state and the body is such that reproduction becomes a patriotic act – as seen through the language ‘doing everything they can for their country.’

⁵⁴ Viktor Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s opening speech at the 2nd Budapest World Congress of Families,” (speech, Budapest, May 27, 2017), <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-opening-speech-at-the-2nd-budapest-world-congress-of-families>.

⁵⁵ Valerie Hopkins, “Hungary chides the childless as ‘not normal’ as birth rate tops agenda,” *Financial Times* (September 5, 2019) <https://www.ft.com/content/fe6ac9c4-cfe3-11e9-99a4-b5ded7a7fe3f>.

⁵⁶ Martin van Hees, Liberal Politics and Demographic Decline. in Camilia Bruil, Patrick van Schie, and Mark van de Velde, eds., *The Dynamics of Demographic Decline*. (The Hague: Elf: 2011), 9.

⁵⁷ “Bemutakozás,” *Családbarát ország*, (accessed April 28, 2020), <https://www.csaladbaratorszag.hu/o/14>.

⁵⁸ Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech,” (2015).

It should also be noted that Hungary's constitution itself, The Fundamental Law of Hungary, which was created by the ruling FIDESZ party and adopted in 2011, claims that Hungary shall protect "family as the basis of the survival of the nation."⁵⁹ This is boasted by PM Orbán in his 2019 speech:

The Hungarian family policy model... is constitutional in nature... which is extremely important. If the essence of demographic policy and its most important elements are not laid down in the Constitution, then it is impossible to pursue long-term family policy. We need constitutional foundations because [they] protect us from anti-family court rulings... without it the life of the Hungarian state and the Hungarian decision-making structure could be penetrated by international organizations, NGOs, networks and centres which are very often anti-family policy.⁶⁰

Establishing the idea that family is the bedrock of the nation allows for the government to then shape their family policies to match the political goals of the state. Furthermore, as stated in Orbán's quote, the constitution supersedes the ability of courts to influence policymaking surrounding family and then creates the ability to deem organizations which criticize the state's family policies as being unconstitutional.

5. *Conclusion to the Chapter*

In this chapter, I have offered an overview of the Hungarian government's discourse surrounding the issue of population decline. Hungary generally takes a strong pronatalist stance which posits a stronger emphasis on traditional family values as the ultimate panacea for population decline. Simultaneously, the government voices strong opposition to the idea of migrants filling gaps in the labor force that result from a declining population. The issue of

⁵⁹ Hungary: Fundamental Law of Hungary, article L (1), (accessed 17 May 2020), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53df98964.html>.

⁶⁰ Orbán, "3rd Budapest Demographic Summit," (2019).

population decline is, furthermore, articulated in such a way that it consistently frames the relevant issues that it is tied to – immigration, gender and sexuality, tradition, European identity – so as to criticize the dominant mode of liberal governance. This is also reflected by its demographic policies which limit economic migration opportunities for immigrants and employ ‘interventionist’ methods for increasing fertility rates.

However, as explained in my literature review, the existing scholarship tends to focus on ethnonationalist leanings as an explanation for Hungary’s political attitude toward its declining population. For example, Myra A. Waterbury considers the problem of population decline as merely ‘fuel’ for ethnonationalist sentiment in Hungary.⁶¹ What a closer look at the political discourse reveals is that invoking ethnonationalism to account for the government’s pro-family and anti-immigration response to population decline offers an incomplete picture at best. This is made evident through the prominent role that contestation of international norms plays in the prime minister’s speeches. A deeper analysis, thus, reveals that the Hungarian government’s discourse on population decline is less so fuel for ethnonationalism (though ethnonationalist sentiment is certainly present) but more so tied to its struggle in combating the dominance of the liberal world order. Accordingly, as I will reveal in the following chapter, Japan serves as an example of a government that has repeatedly been considered ‘ethnonationalist,’ yet which has a response to population decline that is framed to uphold the LIO’s values and norms.

This is further exemplified through the fact that Hungary does in fact uphold certain economic practices valued by the liberal world order such as its participation in free trade agreements within the EU. Yet, the demographic policies associated with Hungary’s declining population have a polarizing effect which allow us to more clearly recognize that, despite some

⁶¹ Waterbury, “Populist Nationalism,” 5.

practices that maintain alignment with the global order, it is more important for the government that the policies are *articulated* in such a way as to contest liberal hegemony. This is in line with the work of Grzbalsaka and Pető, who consider that Hungary’s “demonization of equality politics implemented during the EU accession process has become a key rhetorical tool for defining political antagonism by neoconservative actors struggling for cultural hegemony.”⁶²

⁶² Grzbalsaka and Peto, “The Gendered Modus Operandi,” 165.

Chapter II. Japan's Discourse on Population Decline as Upholding Liberal Hegemony

“As Japan is facing the fastest pace of declining birthrate and aging population in the world, we cannot respond to this challenge by extending the existing policies. We need a totally different level of policy measures.” – Shinzo Abe, 2019⁶³

Japan started reporting sub-replacement fertility rates in the 1970s, when fertility rates dropped to as low as 1.3 children per woman.⁶⁴ As a G7 country with a particularly low fertility rate compared to its companion economic powerhouses, Japan's ‘demographic crisis’ has toppled international news headlines for decades as the ‘fastest-graying nation.’⁶⁵ Japan now has the world's oldest population with over a quarter of the population over the age of 65.⁶⁶ The country reached its total population peak in 2008 at about 128 million people and is expected to shrink to about 88.1 million by 2065.⁶⁷

In contemporary public discourse, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has repeatedly stated that the declining birth rate alongside an aging population is Japan's ‘greatest challenge’ and a “critical situation that should truly be called a national crisis.”⁶⁸ The administration's approach

⁶³ Shinzo Abe, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 198th Session of the Diet,” (speech, January 28, 2019), Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201801/_00003.html.

⁶⁴ “Government response to low fertility rate in Japan,” United Nations Expert Group on Policy Responses to Low Fertility (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015), <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/pop-unpb-011.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35480>.

⁶⁵ Jozuka, Yeung, and Kwon, “Japan's birth rate hits another record low.”

⁶⁶ Population Reference Bureau, “Countries With the Oldest Populations in the World,” (March 23, 2020), <https://www.prb.org/countries-with-the-oldest-populations/>.

⁶⁷ Kusakazu Kato, “We need a sense of crisis over depopulation,” *The Japan Times* (September 5, 2018) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2018/09/05/commentary/japan-commentary/need-sense-crisis-depopulation/#.XsJP9WgzaUk>.

⁶⁸ Shinzo Abe, “New Year's Reflection by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,” (speech, Jan 1, 2019), Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201901/_00001.html#:~:text=Happy%20new%20year%20to%20everyone,a%20pleasant%20and%20restful%20way.&text=The%20Heisei%20era%20dawned%20alongside,a%20long%20period%20of%20deflation and Shinzo Abe, “New Year's Reflection by Shinzo Abe,” (speech, January

to population decline is embedded in its larger reform project projected entitled the “Plan to Realize the Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens.”⁶⁹ Introduced in 2015, the plan involves what are called the ‘new three arrows of Abenomics,’ which includes raising the birthrate to 1.8 by 2025 as one of its ‘arrows.’ The plan centers increased participation of capable citizens, namely women, the elderly, and people with disabilities, in the workforce alongside increased government support for childcare services and social security. Like many initiatives to increase fertility rates, the goal is to create a better work/life balance for those wanting to start families. Since introducing the plan, the government has advanced policies such as offering free public preschool for all children aged 3-5 and free day care services for low-income families.⁷⁰ The prime minister also initiated a policy called ‘Womenomics’ to help get women into the workforce.⁷¹

This chapter is devoted to revealing the ways in which Japan’s response to population decline uses a liberal narrative to advance policies which do not objectively read as liberal. In the following sections, I uncover three areas that most aptly characterize the government’s discourse on population decline. The first section shows how the government’s discourse on population decline pursues pronatalist policies which are articulated to support a ‘liberal’ narrative; implanted amidst the liberal vocabulary of inclusivity, diversity, equality, and freedom yet which also is also constructed to maintain ethnic homogeneity. The second section focuses on the entire omission of immigration from the discourse, further shedding light on the way ethnic homogeneity is kept. The third section discusses how Japan’s uses its identity as a

1, 2018), Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet,

https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201801/_00001.html .

⁶⁹ “National Council for Promoting the Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens,” *Foreign Press Center Japan*, (December 11, 2015) https://fpcj.jp/en/j_views-en/recent_editorials-en/p=38199/#:~:text=The%20National%20Council%20for%20Promoting,measures%20involves%20what%20the%20prime.

⁷⁰ “Government approves free preschool education program starting Oct. 2019,” *The Japan Times* (Dec 28, 2018) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/12/28/national/government-approves-free-preschool-education-program-starting-oct-2019/#.Xu3bN2gzaUk>.

⁷¹ “Women in the workforce – Japan: Quick Take,” *Catalyst* (Oct 2, 2019) <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-the-workforce-japan/>.

‘future-oriented’ and ‘innovative’ country to buttress its purportedly liberal approach to population decline. Finally, I offer a conclusion to the chapter which invokes the existing literature on Japan’s relationship with il/liberalism to further highlight the way Japan’s response to its declining population uses the discourse of the LIO to advance illiberal policies.

1. *Fighting Population Decline via ‘Liberal’ Pronatalism*

The Japanese government’s overarching narrative as a response to population decline pushes for pronatalist policies which ‘support women’s choice’ to have children while simultaneously urging the increased participation of women, the elderly, and the disabled in the workforce to combat the economic consequences of their declining population. As I will reveal in this section, the government articulates this narrative using liberal vocabulary which uses the ideational values of inclusivity, diversity, equality, and freedom. However, a closer look at the discourse exposes, as I will elaborate in my conclusion to the chapter, how such liberal rationale is used as a tool to retain the nation’s ethnic homogeneity and drive economic growth and global competitiveness.

The prime minister consistently invokes the advancement of such social groups regarding their status and participation in society. In his Policy Speech to the 198th Session of the Diet in 2019, the prime minister explicitly attributed women’s empowerment as the solution for population decline by stating:

The landscape of Japan will change dramatically with women’s perspectives and active participation of women. They are a major engine that drives the future growth of Japan that faces declining population.⁷²

Accordingly, in his Policy Speech to the 201st Session of the Diet, PM Abe stated:

⁷² Abe, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 198th Session of the Diet.”

We will create a society in which all people, whether women or men, young or old, people with disabilities or intractable illnesses... can mutually accept their diversity and utilize their originality. That is also a society where everyone can demonstrate their abilities as much as they want. The realization of a society in which all citizens are dynamically engaged will truly be the key to overcoming our declining birthrate and aging society.⁷³

While stressing the direness of the demographic situation, the prime minister consistently links the issue of a declining population to his call for the ‘dynamic engagement’ of all citizens; using the language of liberal equality to suggest that more social categories need to join the workforce. He specifies women, the elderly, and citizens with disabilities by listing dichotomies in which the opposite social group bears the implied privileged regarding employment. In this way, PM Abe frames inclusivity, ‘diversity,’ and equality as the solution to the ‘national crisis’ of the low birth rate and aging population. In other words, with a shrinking labor force, the inclusion of those categories of people which were largely unemployed into the work force is needed to increase the numbers of working citizens – but this is, again, framed as the creation of a ‘diverse’ and equally ‘engaged’ society.

Incidentally, PM Abe also upholds individualism as a value by stressing the importance of ‘originality’ and the idea of a society in which people can ‘demonstrate their abilities as much as they want.’ This angle resonates with the neoliberal ideology which defends individual independence and promotes the significance of opportunity.⁷⁴ This is also made evident by PM Abe’s emphasis on children’s ‘dreams’ at his 2020 New Year’s press conference: “in this age of a declining birthrate, needless to say, we will also expand our assistance towards children

⁷³ Shinzo Abe, “Policy Speech by the Prime Minister to the 201st Session of the Diet,” (speech, January 20, 2020), Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/actions/202001/_00010.html.

⁷⁴ Peter Taylor-Gooby and Benjamin Laruth, “Individualism and Neo-liberalism,” in *Attitudes, Aspirations, and Welfare* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 29-61.

and the childrearing generation. We will endeavor to create a society where all children can work hard towards their dreams, regardless of their families' economic situations.”⁷⁵

The prime minister also frames the government's pronatalist and family support policies in such a way that 'supports' women's reproduction and emphasizes their subjective choice on the matter. Addressing the birth rate directly, he says:

We will provide seamless support for pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing. By spring of 2021, we will establish in every municipality a comprehensive support center for families with small children. We will expand support for low-income single-parent families and further reinforce our efforts to build a society in which it is easy to raise children. Aiming to raise the birthrate to 1.8 children per woman, the level the public has indicated as desirable, we will confront the issue of the decrease in the birthrate, an issue increasing in severity, head on.⁷⁶

By including here that 1.8 is “the level the public has indicated as desirable,” the prime minister frames this national goal of a 1.8 birthrate as *their* (women's) choice rather than the government's. The government's pronatalism is, thus, rationalized as being tied to their citizen's own freedom and choices – strongly resonating with Foucault's concept of ‘governmentality,’ which is a way of understanding governmental rationalities that are intended to shape the behavior of people. Indeed, this is what is sometimes called the ‘art’ of government.⁷⁷

The Japanese government's articulation of freedom to rationalize its pronatalism is further exemplified by the prime minister's statement that:

The greatest challenge for Japan's sustainable growth is the declining birthrate and aging population. During the 30 years of the Heisei period, the

⁷⁵ Shinzo Abe, “New Year's Press Conference by the Prime Minister (Opening Statement),” (speech, Jan 6, 2020), Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/202001/_nypressconference.html.

⁷⁶ Abe, “Policy speech to Policy Speech by the Prime Minister to the 201st Session of the Diet.”

⁷⁷ Kypros Savva, “Governing through freedom and control: A Foucauldian reading of citizenship and rights in EU,” Master's thesis, Lund University, 2014 DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.22060.26242.

birthrate has fallen from 1.57 to 1.26 children per woman... As Japan is facing the fastest pace of declining birthrate and aging population in the world... We need a totally different level of policy measures. If the wishes of the families who want to have and raise children were fulfilled, the birthrate would rise to 1.8 children per woman... By having society as a whole bear these burdens, we will change our course drastically to a Japan where giving birth and raising children are a positive experience.⁷⁸

By expressing that there are families that ‘wish’ to have children but that ‘burdens’ obstruct their ability to do so, PM Abe frames the low birth rate as linked to a lack of freedom. Government interference in the birth rate, then, is rationalized as the opening of opportunities and the creation of freedom rather than a governmental agenda to promote more ethnically Japanese babies.

It is also important to spell out how the prime minister’s stance on inclusivity, diversity, equality, and freedom is complicated by a reality which negates such a seemingly determined political platform. For example, contradictory to PM Abe’s strong stance which aims for the engagement of women in society, Japan is widely criticized for its particularly low ranking in the gender equality index, placing 121st in the World Economic Forum’s gender equality ranking.⁷⁹ As a G7 country having the third largest GDP in the world, Japan’s low ranking has earned the country an international reputation for its deeply entrenched gender roles.

Furthermore, despite PM Abe voicing goals for women’s inclusion in senior government positions and setting a target of a 30% increase in women’s leadership roles by 2030, female parliamentary representation in Japan is still one of the lowest in the world.⁸⁰ Only 5.3% of the prime minister’s cabinet is comprised of positions held by women.⁸¹ The

⁷⁸ Shinzo Abe, “Policy speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 198th session of the diet,” Speech, Jan 28, 2019.

⁷⁹ Tomohiro Osaki, “From bad to worse: Japan slides 11 places to 121st in global gender equality ranking,” *The Japan Times* (Dec 17, 2019) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/12/17/national/social-issues/japan-121st-global-gender-equality-ranking/#.Xu3fjWgzaUk>.

⁸⁰ Eric Johnston, “Women in Japanese politics: Why so few after so very long?” *The Japan Times* (March 6, 2020) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/03/06/reference/women-in-japanese-politics/#.XtI9iDozaUk>.

⁸¹ Tomohiro Osaki, “Let’s discuss gender equality in Japan,” *The Japan Times* (Dec 31, 2019) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2019/12/31/language/lets-discuss-gender-equality-japan/#.XtI6iDozaUk>.

government's overall parliamentary representation is 20% below the average of economically advanced countries.⁸² Also notably, PM Abe was the sole party leader in 2019 to oppose legislation allowing couples to maintain separate family names upon marriage – a stand which misaligns with his statements that uphold women's individuality and empowerment.⁸³

Thus, it may be concluded that 'liberal' ideas such as gender equality are only implemented when they support parallel political agendas such as raising the birth rate and increasing employment rates. As I will reveal in the following sections to the chapter, the Japanese government's liberal brand of governmentality and pronatalist policies also coincide with its less obvious value placed on ethnic homogeneity.

2. *Mum's the Word on Migration*

Japan has long held strict immigration policies amidst public skepticism about the idea of opening up state borders for migrant workers. Indeed, the topic of immigration has been called the 'third rail' of Japanese politics.⁸⁴ Only about 2% of the population of Japan is comprised of foreign nationals, which is quite low compared with other G7 countries. Despite the Abe administration easing the ability for visa opportunities compared with previous administrations – in 2018, he announced that the government would grant 350,000 visas to unskilled workers over the succeeding five years⁸⁵ - economic migration to Japan is still considered remarkably strict for being the world's 3rd largest economy that faces labor shortages.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ "Alone in debate, Abe opposes dual surnames for married couples," *The Asahi Shimbun* (July 4, 2019) <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201907040033.html>.

⁸⁴ Menju Toshihiro, "Japan's Historic Immigration Reform: A Work in Progress," *nippon.com* (Feb 6, 2019) <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a06004/japan%E2%80%99s-historic-immigration-reform-a-work-in-progress.html>.

⁸⁵ Matt Katz, "What happens when Japan stops looking 'Japanese'?" *The Atlantic* (Dec 23, 2019) <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/12/immigration-japan-national-identity/603568/>.

The government's hesitation to consider immigration opportunities foreign nationals remains strong amidst political discourse on the topic of Japan's declining population. Although PM Abe expresses that the greatest challenge of depopulation is the loss of economic growth due to a shrinkage in the labor force, consideration of immigration to fill the gaps is largely avoided in his speeches and statements. In his 2018 New Year's Reflection, PM Abe said:

Japan now once again faces a critical situation that should truly be called a national crisis: our dwindling birth rate alongside our aging society. Six years ago, Japan was awash in pessimism towards the future. "With a declining population, Japan is no longer able to grow." However through Abenomics over the past five years, nominal GDP has grown by more than 11 percent to reach a record high. Even as our working-age population declined by 3.90 million, employment increased by 1.85 million. The percentage of women in the workforce now surpasses that of the US for all age groups over age 25.⁸⁶

In the speech that follows, the prime minister does not mention immigration opportunities for foreign nationals – he also does not attribute any of the growth in labor to the policies which *did* allow for certain levels immigration. Rather, he continues to state, "We can change the future with our own hands. Everything depends on the aspirations and eagerness of us, the Japanese people." The increase in employment is linked to, specifically, the participation of women in the workforce and, more generally, 'the Japanese people.'

What this reluctance to allow immigration reveals is the government's prioritization of ethnic homogeneity at the cost of its labor force. While the government pursues pronatalist policies to increase the birthrate, it also quietly does this in spite of other options such as opening migration opportunities – options which would, by foregrounding open borders as a solution to population decline, seemingly match a liberal narrative more closely. Rather, the

⁸⁶ Abe, "New Year's Reflection by Shinzo Abe," (2018).

government articulates its response to population decline by using liberal rationale to enact illiberal policies.

3. *Japan as a ‘Future-Oriented’ Country*

A final area which portrays the Japanese government’s response to population decline concerns the identity of Japan as a future-oriented and innovative country. Japan is certainly considered one of the world’s leading states in technology and innovation, with groundbreaking innovations such as the Walkman in 1979 or the Nintendo in the 1970s igniting global recognition. Accordingly, the prime minister consistently frames Japan as a ‘future-oriented’ country; one which keeps its eye ‘squarely on the future.’⁸⁷

PM Abe relayed at a Reuters Newsmakers event in New York that “Japan may be aging. Japan may be losing its population. But these are incentives for us. Why? Because we will continue to be motivated to grow our productivity.”⁸⁸ According to Reuters, PM Abe cited robots, Artificial Intelligence, and wireless sensors, as the innovations which could help the country overcome its demographic dilemma. The prime minister accordingly stated at the CeBIT technology trade show in Hannover, Germany in 2017 that “Japan has no fear of AI. Machines will snatch away jobs? Such worries are not known to Japan. Japan aims to be the very first to prove that growth is possible through innovation, even when a population declines.”⁸⁹

Corresponding with Abe’s statement, the Japanese government’s website declares that:

⁸⁷ Shinzo Abe, “New Year’s Reflection by the Prime Minister,” (speech, Jan 1, 2020) Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/202001/_00001.html and Abe, “Policy Speech by the Prime Minister at the 201st Session of the Diet,” (2020).

⁸⁸ Linda Sieg, “Abe: Japan’s shrinking population not burden but incentive,” *Reuters* (Sep 21, 2016) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-abe-new-york/abe-japans-shrinking-population-not-burden-but-incentive-idUSKCN11R1N1>.

⁸⁹ Arjun Kharpal, “Japan has no fear of AI – it could boost growth despite population decline, Abe says,” *CNBC* (March 29, 2017) <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/03/19/japan-has-no-fear-of-ai--it-could-boost-growth-despite-population-decline-abe-says.html>.

“Japan is committed to being the very first country to prove that it is possible to grow through innovation even when its population declines.”⁹⁰ The website further cites two programs titled “Society 5.0” and “Human Resources Development Revolution.” A report by ANZ institutional banking describes the program as such:

This ‘third arrow’ aims to transform... the economic policy approach to a shrinking population... The two main programmes in the ‘third arrow’ are: “Society 5.0” A holistic policy that aims to extend the digitally disruptive fourth industrial revolution into all areas of society.... [And] “Human Resources Development Revolution” Focussed squarely on labour market reforms, it aims to make childcare, tertiary education and flexible employment more accessible in order to keep more women and older people in the workforce and boost productivity.⁹¹

As seen by the goals of the ‘third arrow’ initiative, the government seeks to supplement its focus on increased childcare support and women in the workforce with an exceptional technological innovation program which also bolster’s the country’s identity as a ‘future-oriented’ country. Doing so also contributes to its alignment with the liberal hegemonic projects in that a narrative of ‘a fourth industrial revolution’ leans toward a more secular identity as well – as opposed to the religious traditionalism seen in self-claimed illiberal states such as Hungary.

4. Conclusion to the Chapter

In this chapter I have introduced the Japanese government’s approach to their country’s demographic issue of population decline. The government takes a more ‘liberal’ approach to its demographic project of ethnic homogeneity by emphasizing the engagement of all citizens,

⁹⁰ “Innovation Japan,” JapanGov, (accessed May 20, 2020), <https://www.japan.go.jp/technology/innovation/#:~:text=Japan%20is%20committed%20to%20being,%2C%20agrarian%2C%20industrial%20and%20information.>

⁹¹ Richard Yetsenga, “Japan’s Demographic Alchemy,” *ANZ Institutional Banking* (August 2018) <https://institutional.anz.com/insight-and-research/Japans-Demographic-Alchemy.>

particularly women, into society and creating conditions which allow women to have as many children as *‘they’* desire. Simultaneously, the government excludes immigration from the public discourse as a remedy for the economic burdens that a declining population has on the workforce and endorses innovative technology as a viable option to also supplement the labor gaps.

Interestingly, Jennifer Lind notices that Japan’s engagement with the LIO has been less liberal compared to that of Europe and the United States – and argues that this illiberal slant is why the populism that has emerged in countries such as Hungary missed Japan.⁹² In other words, for Lind, Japan’s reputation as a ‘key member of the post-World War II liberal international order’ - but that has still held a ‘nationalist agenda’ and employed lesser-noticed illiberal policies - positions its governance so as to not need the counter-hegemonic discourse of right-wing populism.⁹³ Rather, Japan may utilize the liberal hegemonic discourse to enact policies which are not necessarily orientated toward a liberal set of values.

Similar to Lind’s conclusions, my analysis shows that Japan uses liberal narratives to uphold less liberal projects. The government’s response to population decline favors ethnic homogeneity but articulates its pronatalist stance - unlike the Hungarian government’s - in *alignment* with ideas such as gender equality by promoting the role of women in society and framing family policy as helping women achieve ‘their’ family goals.

⁹² Lind, “Nationalism in a Liberal Order,” 69.

⁹³ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This research project has asked how political reactions to the demographic phenomenon of declining populations interacts with larger ideological struggles on an international level, using the declining countries of Hungary and Japan as case studies. My findings reveal that while states maintain some elements of the liberal international order while rejecting others, the way governments *articulate* their responses to their declining populations conveys a polarization in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses that are used to either adhere to or resist the liberal international order, respectively. What this polarization ultimately determines is that, despite being a seemingly trivial political issue, states' reactions to shrinking populations serve as an impactful political space for the struggle over the nature of world order and its constituent elements.

Concluding the analysis of this paper necessitates a return to Laclau and Mouffe's application of Gramsci's 'cultural hegemony.' Building on Gramsci's idea that ideology legitimizes the practices of powerful actors, Laclau and Mouffe argue that actors trying to resist ideological hegemony must construct an antagonistic story which frames the dominant discourse as oppressive.⁹⁴ In contemporary global politics, such a struggle for ideological hegemony can be seen through the backlash against the norms and values upheld by the US-led LIO that has reigned since the end of the Cold War.

As can be seen through my discourse analysis of the Hungarian and Japanese governments, the discourse on population decline functions as what Laclau refers to as an 'empty signifier', because both the hegemonic liberal ideology and its opposing 'illiberal' counter-hegemonic struggle are being used to legitimize the same demographic projects. Both Hungary and Japan aim to maintain ethnic homogeneity despite a shrinking labor force – yet the Hungarian government articulates this goal and its subsequent pronatalist agenda using

⁹⁴ UNSW Learning, "Laclau and Mouffe."

anti-liberal values while the Japanese government uses liberal principals to maintain a similar pronatalist agenda. For example, the Hungarian government directly says that ‘gender debates’ must come second to the demographic crisis of a declining population whereas in Japan notions of gender equality are purportedly a driving force in combating population decline. While these are seemingly contrasting ideologies, the end goal of ethnic homogeneity is the same.

My research contributes to the field of IR scholarship in that it sheds light on the interplay between domestic demographic trends and the international landscape. With the number of states that will reach their population peak rising in the ensuing years, especially among developed states in the West and in East Asia, IR scholars must anticipate growing tensions surrounding the way states handle their declining populations. More broadly, this research beckons a stronger bridge between political demography and international politics – encouraging sharp attention to how the character of population control is changing according to new international norms and values.

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