

FROM CLASSROOM TO SOCIETY:

**Mechanisms of Social Reproduction Through Hungarian
Educational Institutions Under Orbán's Reign**

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ABSTRACT

There is an intense discussion on the authoritarian turn in Hungary, focusing on the country's institutional and state apparatus aspects. However, not many scholars scrutinise the informal reconstruction of the state. The thesis seeks to expand on the latter by examining if and how the education system under the Orbán regime aims to reproduce the clientelist political and economic elite as well as the masses of unskilled labourers who will provide the votes. The research gathers information from speeches, legislation, articles, databases, books, and journal articles. The thesis concludes that the regime reproduces the masses of unskilled labourers by trapping them in steadily declining public education with unattainable alternatives. In parallel, the Orbán regime provides alternative educational pathways to escape the public education system. However, those pathways are only reachable for those with the monetary means to educate their children. At the end of the process, children from decent socio-economic backgrounds obtain a university degree and the possibility to join the clientelist elite.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BME - Budapest University of Technology and Economics (Budapesti Műszaki és Gazdasági Egyetem)

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

EU – European Union

FIDESZ – Union of Young Democrats (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége)

MCC – Matthias Corvinus Collegium

NER – System of National Cooperation (Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere)

TANOSZ - National Professional Association of Textbook Makers (Tankönyvesek Országos Szakmai Egyesülete)

INTRODUCTION

The long-awaited end of history outlined by Francis Fukuyama promised that Eastern European states that escaped the suffocating grasp of the Soviet Union would embark on the path of democracy and liberalism (Fukuyama, 1989). This vision seemed to manifest itself for a while. At the beginning of the 2010s, Hungary abandoned the path of democracy and has been developing more and more authoritarian tendencies.

There has been an immense amount of discussion on the authoritarian turn in Eastern Europe in the post-Soviet era, especially in Hungary. Many scholars, such as Bozóki or Bottoni, displayed the formal reconstruction of the state and the establishment of a Potemkin democracy, where institutions are secondary to the officials. Some identify this regime as an electoral autocracy, illiberal democracy, or a hybrid regime.

Scrutinising the institutional and legal realm of the Orbán regime does not provide sufficient insight into the Orbán regime. The informal transformation of the state is just as significant as the formal reconstruction. Körösnéyi (2020) and Magyar (2022) have begun to shed light on the primacy of clientelism, patronage and the cultural shift as the guiding principle of statecraft. There has not been in-depth research on these aspects of Hungary, as the components of a cultural shift are vast and complicated.

One crucial aspect of the informal transformation of the state happens through education, which moulds the future of the country. Even though there is information about the reform of public education in Hungary, the entirety of it, and how it serves the reign of Orbán, if it does at all, it has not yet been placed under the magnifying glass.

Education plays a pivotal role in a child's upbringing. On the domestic level, the education system is an inescapable entity that influences the future generation and the

country's future. Subsequently, observing the Hungarian education system has the potential to aid in highlighting future trends in society, politics, and culture.

Therefore, the thesis is interested in how the education system under the Orbán regime reproduces the clientelist elite in Hungary that would gather under the patronage of Viktor Orbán. Furthermore, the thesis seeks to examine if, in Hungary, the education system during the reign of Orbán produces poorly educated unskilled labour that serves as the voting basis of FIDESZ for the future.

The thesis hypothesises that the Hungarian education system is set up so that children from decent socio-economic backgrounds have multiple possibilities to receive good quality education that enables them to obtain a university degree and join the political elite of the Hungarian prime minister. In parallel, the public education system traps the rest of the children, which does not enable them to learn valuable skills and harness their potential. Therefore, they will become an unskilled labour force and the voting base for the government.

The research utilises various sources, including in-depth academic research, articles, speeches, and statements from stakeholders, such as parents or ministers. The thesis will also incorporate legislation, legal texts, and statistics from Hungarian and international databases.

The thesis is structured as follows: First, the thesis will establish the theoretical framework of clientelism and the informal reconstruction of the state. Secondly, the thesis will dive into a literature review to display the power of education to reproduce the elite and the masses in democratic and non-democratic countries. Thirdly, the analysis starts by showcasing the public education system's terrible condition and argues that its purpose is to force the elite to search for alternatives and produce the masses of the future voting base. Fourth, the paper will delve into the first selective process of elite recreation, the religious schools. Fifth, the thesis will examine how talented pupils who do not come from a decent socio-economic background may join clientelism at the cost of great indoctrination. Finally,

the thesis will scrutinise how the elite's wealth enables them to bypass public education and have educated children.

CHAPTER 1 - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Clientelism

In a clientelist state structure, the locus of power over resources is in the hands of the chief of the patron-client chain. It is essential for the chief patron to be the sole centre of power and eliminate potential alternatives. The clients may leave for better alternatives if the patron's primacy is dubious (Robinson & Verdier, 2013.). The vertical patron-client chains interweave society based on dependence on the chief patron. In such a state, the institutions are severely weakened, and the formality of the state apparatus fades. Instead, a system emerges that relies on the strength of relationships between people. Therefore, the rule of law and accountability of individuals are overwritten by a mechanism that distributes rewards and punishments in accordance with the chief patron's goal. The rewards are the abundance of available resources strongly tied to the strength of one's connection in the patron-client chain. The Hungarian case of clientelism is omnipotent because there is only one locus of power, meaning that no alternative entity would hand out the rewards and punishments (Magyar & Madlovics, 2022.). Therefore, a client can not join another chain with a more rewarding cost-benefit ratio.

Clientelism is different from other types of social hierarchy, such as a feudal or a caste system; sociology classifies it as a frozen class order. The clientelist hierarchy is informal, and there is low social mobility. Its legitimacy depends on the highest member. Additionally, joining a stratum depends on loyalty, and a title and resources might be revoked if there is no sufficient level of loyalty. Furthermore, in a clientelist society, autonomy is significantly reduced but not eradicated (Magyar & Madlovics, 2022.). Suppression only manifests itself when autonomy harms politics.

The Orbán regime established a clientelist regime with three strata, with Viktor Orbán as the chief patron. The upper one consists of the political leadership (ministers and

representatives of FIDESZ) and the oligarchy, which acts as a *Strohmänn* of political interests on the market. The middle stratum is the serving nobility, the intellectuals who have some direct relations with the court of the chief patron. The lowest level of the clientelist hierarchy is occupied by the broader society, either in the public sector under the authority of the state or the people who work for companies owned by the oligarchy. Orbán ensures that a new patron will not emerge through a series of policies, such as reducing the possibilities of party funding or seizing tax revenue from municipalities (Magyar & Madlovics, 2022.). It must be noted that not all the Hungarian society is a member of the patron-client chain. Hence, besides the rewards and punishments, the state provides normative services such as pensions or exemptions from taxation under age 26.

1.2. Informal Reconstruction of the State

The transformation of the education system is not a phenomenon on its own; it has been happening with the informal reconstruction of the state, which goes beyond restructuring state institutions. The reconstruction means that the border between society and state fades because the informal clientelist relationships with Orbán become more important than the official positions that tie someone to the prime minister. Therefore, the close group surrounding Orbán is more stable than the positions of minister in the past 14 years. The importance of relations to Orbán was foreshadowed in 2003 when FIDESZ decided to give authority over every decision to the president of the party, Viktor Orbán. Henceforth, everything within the party depended on the informal relations with Orbán. The state extends its reach towards the public sphere via informal relations to transform the country. That extended reach manifests itself in a top-down capture of economics, where instead of the invisible hand of the market, the invisible hand of Orbán is the guiding power. The monumental amount of money received from the EU goes towards the client. Additionally, there are the *ad personam* laws that sought to elevate clients to access public procurement

tenders. In 2009, Orbán gave a speech that expressed the importance of dethroning the post-communist elite and raising a Christian-conservative financial, intellectual, and cultural elite. The narrative behind producing a new loyal elite is regaining sovereignty through a strategic partnership in national goals (Körösenyi et al. 2020.).

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

The research by Neundorf and Pop-Eleches (2020) argues that authoritarian states that would like to control their subjects closely are especially interested in subduing the education system. During that process, public schools transform into places of indoctrination (Neundorf & Pop-Eleches, 2020.). Even though democratic countries experience the reproduction of the elite to a certain degree, states with strong authoritarian tendencies directly utilise the education system to achieve their goals. That means that legislative efforts will not stop until public education is able to fully serve the political goal, which is mainly the extension of reign and upholding the status quo.

Although every education system reproduces the elite to a certain degree, each performs it in various ways to a different degree. The Argentinian example showcases that pupils attending elite schools will later study at universities in the US or Europe. After obtaining their degrees, these people will become the leaders of governance and industry in Europe. A variety of private institutions offer education in parallel to public education. Some receive state subsidies, some are related to a church, and some are non-profit organisations. Although private education creates considerably better career opportunities, the masses still receive a decent public education as it is historically a part of national pride. The elite public schools are more oriented towards reproducing the political elite of Argentina. The selection process favours educated families, but meritocracy is crucial in choosing candidates. Private education caters to the family of the wealthy and produces the future for the country's economic elite. The uniqueness of the Argentinian case is that it not only reinforces the ongoing social divisions but separates the elite of the public sector from the elite of the private sector (Maxwell & Aggleton 2016).

The case of the United States provides a different perspective on elite education since it is embedded in neoliberalism and the myth of meritocracy. The combination of the two

projects is a view on American education that social inequalities are justified because they are based on winners and losers. Social status and wealth play an essential role in being at the upper echelon of characteristics meritocracy favours. Hence, to be a member of the elite, it is a prerequisite to participate in elite education throughout one's childhood and early adult years (Shamash, 2018.). Consequently, American education does not allow wealth to flow in society; instead, it keeps it stagnant in the upper strata of society. Shamash argues: "The median annual income of Harvard parents is \$450,000, the same average as the top 2% of income earners in the United States" (Shamash, 2018. Pp. 10.). Additional research conducted in the United States concludes that students with intellectual and higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to go to elite high schools and elite colleges. Additionally, the level of association between attending elite high school and gaining admission to an elite college was higher than having a high GPA in school (Kang, 2021.).

Extensive comparative research on elite education, displaying France, Belgium, and Chile, identified various methods for elite education that are vastly different. In France, elite schools are regarded highly partly because of the quality and intensity of education and partly because of the career opportunities it provides. Fundamentally, in France, accession to elite institutions is based on centralised scores informed by academic accomplishments (Verhoeven, Draelants, and Turri, 2022.). Elite education in Chile presents a unique phenomenon of elite production. The elite membership heavily depends on the area of studies (law, medicine, economics, and civil engineering) that leads to a career required to join the Chilean elite. Despite the pluralism of education in Chile, the elite remains a firmly closed group. Ultimately, families that have accumulated a considerable amount of wealth will be able to send their children to elite high schools and then to elite universities (Verhoeven, Draelants, and Turri, 2022.). In Belgium, informal matters are also considered an institution reproducing the elite, not only fees. Additionally, no preparatory exams are required to join an

elite university to join the elite semi-officially. Here, the selection for an elite education partly depends on academic accomplishment and the student's socio-economic background (Verhoeven, Draelants, and Turri, 2022.).

Utilising public education to transform future generations and their ideals is common in authoritarian states. The research on the Chinese case by Cantoni (2017.) proves that meddling with public education has the power to create monumental shifts in society and culture. Beginning in 2001, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set out to undertake China's Eight Curriculum Reform. The aim was to transfer the correct worldview to the pupils and establish new social and political beliefs (Cantoni et al. 2017.). The author of the textbook stated, "The Politics textbook is the spiritual material that the country provides for its students. Writing the Politics textbook is an act at the state level rather than an academic activity of the individual author. Although the high school Politics textbook teaches basic knowledge, it possesses strong political, policy-oriented, and scientific characteristics. With a large readership, it will influence an entire generation of young people." (Cantoni et al., 2017, p. 346.). The results of the Eight Curriculum Reform were significant and daunting. Education influenced economic and political attitudes significantly and to a higher degree than any other media of information. The reform suggests that the indoctrination of students is efficient in authoritarian settings. Students who participated in the reform view Chinese institutions as more democratic than hitherto, and they invest much trust in these institutions (Cantoni et al. 2017). Ultimately, this proves that authoritarian control over education is an effective measure and aids the leader in pursuing the transformation of culture and society.

CHAPTER 3 - ANALYSIS

3.1. - Reproduction of Masses

After the colossal defeat of the socialist-liberal coalition in the 2010 election, Viktor Orbán reclaimed his coveted office, accompanied by a constitutional majority. Under the construction of the NER, the government ripped the municipal districts from their autonomy over education and initiated a large-scale centralisation. The age of compulsory education has decreased to 16 (previously, children started primary school at 6-7 and were required to attend until 18 years old); subsequently, early school leaving has increased (Szurovecz, 2022.). The worsening quality of education (as it will be showcased shortly) created numerous factors that facilitated early school leaving. These include school segregation, inability to keep up with the requirements, lack of communication between parents and teachers and the overall failure of schools to cater to children individually (Bognár et al. 2014.). Therefore, the level of education and language skills, which should have some equalising effect (although limited), diminish, and stratification grows. Hence, it will become even more challenging to combat the existing inequalities. The policies under Orbán's reign initiated a selective process to separate the elite from the masses to reproduce social division and the levels of the clientelist chain.

The government sought to reclaim all the power from municipalities that were lost due to the socialist-liberal leadership between 2002 and 2010. Centralisation of education restricted the autonomy of municipal districts to choose the materials and shape the curriculum. The continuous curtailing of local authority over public education reached its completion in 2019. According to the National Professional Association of Textbook Makers (TANOSZ), new regulations placed the development, publishing and supply of textbooks almost exclusively in the hands of the state and the church (EduLine, 2019.). The increasing level of centralisation demolished the idea of professional leadership. Furthermore, it put the children at the mercy of the government, especially the chief patron, Viktor Orbán.

Considering the current moral and legitimacy crisis of the government (stemming from giving a presidential pardon to a person pursuing paedophilia), it is not a piece of reassuring news for the hundreds of thousands of pupils. Due to the goal of social reproduction, the elite and the unskilled voting labour force spend a significant amount of time in public education. Hence, it is vital to formulate the thoughts of the pupils from an early age. That long-term investment will return in future elections.

In accordance with the Fundamental Law of Hungary, the government announced an education and general upbringing that rests on the Christian and national identity declared in the Fundamental Law (Neumann, 2022.). Although most of the policies do not showcase any explicit ideological background, their orientation is to maximise the value returned, measured in their electoral power and the power of the clientelist elite (Neumann, 2022.). „The most notable neoconservative policies initiated in the first government cycle entailed the reinforcement of a traditional ‘chalk and talk’ knowledge-oriented curriculum with a nationalist agenda in the humanities (2012, 2020), the introduction of the compulsory choice between ethics and religious education in the school curriculum (2014).” (Neumann, 2023, Pp. 651). On the surface, the compulsory study of religion (or ethics) is beneficial for its cultural and historical relevance. People who join religious classes are reinforced to be part of the Christian public sphere, which has had close ties to FIDESZ for decades (Greskovits, 2020.). Additionally, joining the public sphere has advantages in university accession; the essay will expand on it later. The education system not only reproduces the class divisions but indoctrinates children to ensure loyalty to the chief patron.

The fact that one of the main goals of the education system is to strengthen the nation and the children are not in focus is well represented in a quote from the State Secretary of Education in the Ministry of Human Resources from 2012: “Let me quote a dictum from Juvenalis: let us pray for a healthy soul in a healthy body. Recognising the moral, physical

and spiritual decline of the Romans, he feared the collapse of the empire. His words are warning signs for us today: it is unlikely that a healthy soul would be found in a weak and flabby body. And a sick soul is a great danger to the country because it cannot fulfil its original mission, quality individual and community life” (Neumann, 2023, Pp. 654.). Rózsa Hoffman, the State Secretary of Education in the Ministry of Human Resources in the 2010-2014 government cycle of Orbán, unveiled the government’s true intentions. It is essential to create a desired strong soul among the general population and the future voting base so that the reign of Orbán can be as extensive as possible.

Beyond the knowledge shared in schools, education quality, among other factors, relies heavily on the availability of professionals who can transfer knowledge to the next generation. There is a significant discrepancy between the attitude of government officials and trade unions on the existence of such issues. The former states that the number of teachers per student is better than the EU average (Nagy, 2023.). Therefore, the public outcry over the lack of teachers is not rooted in reality. The teachers’ union emphasises mass resignations, collapsing education, and the fact that thousands of teachers have said they will leave the profession if the ‘status law’ is passed (which has been passed since). The education system’s performance dramatically decreases because no institution can guarantee a satisfactory supply of teachers. In 2019, 40% of teaching jobs were vacant; in cities it was over 20%. The lack of teachers is a common experience of pupils all over the country (Pálos, 2023.). Therefore, the pupils will not have the chance to gain adequate knowledge to complete successful final exams and gain admission to the university of their choice. Long before attending the exams and applying to universities, many children are likelier, never to reach the level needed to pursue a university degree. The equalising power of education has diminished so grandiosely that it alone is unable to help pupils with university admission to a decent institution.

Another monumental issue in public education is the lack of specialised teachers who teach one or two subjects in primary schools. Although the government denies that teacher shortage is a problem, it is a rare exception to find a school where there is no teacher shortage (Windisch, 2024.). Many are trying to solve the situation by rehiring retired teachers, but there is much substitution and filling in, which does not improve the quality of education much either. In order to combat the issue, the government's Potemkin solution is to abolish the restriction that the teacher must have the necessary educational qualifications in the field of education in order to teach a particular class (Windisch, 2024.). A head teacher stated that a pupil not taught by a teacher specialising in biology, regardless of their talent, will not become a doctor (Windisch, 2024.). Essentially, the pupils will not have the required knowledge to meet the expectations of the secondary school curriculum. This situation created a downward spiral for the children and prevented them from receiving decent education offered by the state. Completing the final exams necessary for university admissions is out of reach for the masses.

According to Tamás Totyik, president of the Teachers' Union, since the beginning of the 1990s, there have never been so many people working as teachers in educational institutions without a degree (Juhász, 2023.). Erzsébet Nagy, a spokeswoman for the Democratic Trade Union of Teachers, added that the teacher shortage has become widespread lately, with graduate students teaching classes, often unsupervised, contrary to the law (Juhász, 2023.). The lack of professional teachers predestines the quality of education children will receive. It becomes increasingly challenging to meet the standards of inquiry and examination. Hence, the system set up is an uphill battle for pupils to receive quality education.

The consequences of education policies have become apparent very recently. The most recent PISA survey findings, released by the OECD, indicate that 15-year-old Hungarian

pupils have never done worse on the math test than they did in 2022. Hungarian students' performance declined in the other two knowledge areas of the survey. They received the second-worst score ever in the exams' history (Tar, 2023.). The continuous decline of education and competence will prevent children from being members of civil society and being able to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. An explicit goal of the government is to produce a wide range of blue-collar workers who specialise in specific trades (Orbán, 2024.). The NER's goal has never been to offer education that allows for an extensive intellectual class or a high-skilled working class because an intellectual class would present a more significant threat to the maintenance of the Orbán regime.

As stated before, Hungarian students have been underperforming in the international PISA assessment of 15-year-old students' abilities for years. The latest 2022 survey showcases that 27% of pupils are functionally illiterate (Tar, 2023.). Pupils' difficulties in reading comprehension are already evident at the end of lower secondary school, but two-thirds of children in need of help do not receive adequate support. The socio-cultural background of their parents significantly influenced children's reading skills; i.e. the children of mothers with higher educational attainment performed better in the survey (Tornyos, 2024.). The refusal to battle functional illiteracy will result in adults unable to analyse information, think critically, and adequately pursue their self-claimed ends (Tornyos, 2024.). Instead, any institution or entity will be able to exploit the education system's failure, and many people will be exposed to it and potentially become victims of manipulation.

Disadvantaged children are increasingly concentrated in vocational education (after completing primary school at 14), which has been shortened and introduces less general knowledge. The development of primary and social skills has been neglected (Szurovecz, 2022.). Furthermore, the government withdrew most of the financial support for social inclusion and desegregation (Neumann, 2022.). Children who do not have a decent socio-

economic background and are not talented within the confines of the Hungarian public education fall short of acquiring any method that would equalise their situation (Neumann, 2022.). Quite the contrary, it is a negative feedback loop that, generally, does not let people transcend the caste they were born into. Subsequently, people who do not fit the government's idea of a potential elite by any stretch of the imagination will be pushed to become unskilled labourers.

Today, there is a government-sponsored selection through admissions procedures. The return to a focus on facts and figures knowledge raises questions about how children can meet the graduation requirements if there is no one to teach them what the system demands them to learn. In addition to segregation on the basis of family background, the system is unable to respond well to the diversity of pupils, and the system for pupils with special educational needs has been reformed until it disappeared (Ercse, 2024.). According to the viewpoint of the government, instead of pursuing professionals to help children with their development, it is adequate to tell stories to children. It aids children's development and does not waste taxpayer money (Ercse, 2024.).

Essentially, the message of the government is the following: professionals such as special education teachers, school psychologists, educational counsellors, and youth workers are just useless wastes of budget. Being a good parent is more than enough. However, most parents are unable to finance the education of their children outside of public education. Hence, most of them are captives of the public education system, which the government is not willing to develop. Consequently, children from poor socio-economic backgrounds will end up as unskilled wage workers waiting to be exploited by the government.

3.2. – Reproduction of the Elite

3.2.1. – Religious Schools

The cooperation between the state and church, especially in Hungary, has traditional roots that go back hundreds of years. Before the Orbán era, cooperation was vital during the interwar period. Under the Orbán regime, numerous officials explicitly noted that there is currently a strategic partnership between the state and the church. (Neumann, 2022.). In accordance with the de-secularisation of the state, the share of church-run schools more than doubled. Regarding secondary schools, a quarter of all secondary schools are operated by a church. Simultaneously, the number of pupils attending religious schools has dramatically increased in regions that are not well-endowed and in small towns. These schools sweep up the children of the local elite, leading to the deterioration of the public schools (Szurovecz, 2022.). This phenomenon leads to school segregation in the countryside, where children from unfortunate family backgrounds, especially Roma children, receive a significantly worse education, as described in the previous chapter. This phenomenon creates an implicit but powerful selective process and puts pupils of good socio-economic backgrounds on a path to success. While the other receives the previously mentioned public education.

The catholic and reformed church has been a stable element of education policy since 2010. Whatever responsibility can be passed on to the churches is passed on, at least to those who are FIDESZ's political allies (Kozák, 2024.). This mentality is why the churches have become so important in secondary education, especially in high school education, with roughly a quarter of high school students now attending a church high school. Religious schools in some areas have siphoned off higher-status children, and as a result, the proportion of Roma and disadvantaged children in state schools has skyrocketed. (Szabó, 2024.). Children in religious schools will have a vastly more valuable experience than their contemporaries who experience segregation. Attending a religious school has monumental

importance regarding university admission points, which the essay will introduce in the next chapter.

3.2.2. – University Entrance Regulations

The application process at the end of secondary education requires students to collect a maximum of 500 points. Each university sets a minimum threshold for students to reach out of the 500 points to gain admission. From 2024, out of the 500 points, the universities have the power to give 100 points to students for completing some requirements ('Így Változnak a Pontszámítás Szabályai 2024-Től' 2022). Hence, universities (most under indirect government control) set up an arbitrary value system in which students who enrolled on the course offered by Matthias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) under the control of the political director to the prime minister (who has daily personal contact with Viktor Orbán) may earn twice as much surplus points as someone completing a B2 language exam (Kovács, 2023.). The MCC's agreement with the universities will affect all students in the country, as there will be unfair competition for the same surplus points. Completing the Secondary School Programme of MCC is incomparable in terms of energy and time to pass a language exam, and thus, the MCC will become an increasingly powerful solution to the problems of a steadily deteriorating public education (Kovács, 2023.). Nevertheless, the social injustice of this is immeasurable. If MCC fills the holes in public education, it is precisely that those students trying to break out of the most vulnerable, most exhilarating situations in life will be deprived of quality education and any equalising effort. Moreover, those who are given the opportunity to become MCC students can have another stepping stone compared to other students.

MCC's presence is unique, meaning that it is an institution financed indirectly by the government that provides quality education. In parallel, presentations and other activities, not including the classes, are one-sided and lack critical engagement. Essentially, that aspect serves the indoctrination of the Christian-nationalist identity of the government. Many

participating students also know the MCC High School Programme as a “Janissary” programme. However, the ideological education of the MCC is only a first step towards the much more crude and politically motivated university education (Tornyos, 2023.). Given that this institution and the vast majority of universities are indirectly under the control of the government, the collaboration is swift. For example, the Széchenyi István University announced: “In September 2021, our university signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Mathias Corvinus Collegium, which plays an important role in talent development in Hungary; therefore, we will reward the achievements of students who complete the MCC High School Programme with surplus points” (Kovács, 2023.). The so-called talent development can be exchanged for elite development, where children of upper-middle and upper-class families join Orbán’s education institution to be able to attend universities. In contrast, more talented children from dire socio-economic backgrounds will miss out on university accession unfairly. MCC further strengthens the divide between those engaged in the clientelist chain and the masses.

The employees of the MCC’s Centre for Learning Research help to validate the government’s narrative of Hungarian education as the preachers of a new sect by not only brushing aside the suggestions and trends that can be gleaned from comparative research or recent data but also fabricating an ideology along political lines (Lannert, 2024.). Therefore, in the future, the government’s resources will be used to create a select group of people who will ensure the political elite’s power and further reinforce the increasingly rigid social hierarchy in Hungary. The story becomes particularly abhorrent when we see that the MCC’s filtered students are not intended to receive a Prussian education at all but that the MCC’s education programme includes non-knowledge-based features such as small group, personalised forms of teaching, mentoring, individual, pair, group work, project work, practice-based approach (Lannert, 2024.). Their aim is to help students find and apply

teaching and learning methodological strategies that best harmonise with their abilities and to read such prominent Westernised things as the effective use of didactic methods adapted to the character of the groups being trained (Lannert, 2024.). Essentially, education at MCC offers everything the public one does not. While a select few will harness their talents and gain skills, the vast majority of children will never have such experience as they have no viable options outside of public education.

A new form of elite reproduction has recently emerged in the context of university entrances that monumentally favour wealth and nepotism. At the University of Dunaújváros, 15 points out of 100 are awarded if the applicant's family member - grandparent, parent, child, sibling, or spouse - graduated from the university. Considering that social mobility was inadequate even before Orbán's reign (although it was better), such measures explicitly reproduced the elite (Csik, 2024.). Moreover, the selective process of religious education returns here. Previously, the thesis described that attending religious schools provides significantly better education to children, especially in the countryside. Additionally, children attending religious classes are more likely to be embedded in churches, which the government has oversight. Universities operated by churches reward this commitment to religious schools by considering such faith activities (Csik, 2024.). Hence, more fortunate pupils are rewarded for their fortune, while the less well-endowed are punished for being unfortunate.

3.2.3. – Upper-Middle and Upper Classes

The presence of extracurricular teachers is quite prominent in the country, facilitated by the declining quality of education. Some experts say that in order to achieve a decent result on the final exams, one must spend a fortune on extracurricular teachers for each subject (Windisch, 2024.). In a series of interviews, a parent extensively talked about extracurricular teachers. She noted that there is not enough money to get the children out of public school and rely solely on teachers. The two children used to attend extracurricular classes in Math and

English, which cost the parents at least a hundred euros. Now that they are about to do entrance exams for secondary schools, the parents spend roughly €500 a month to provide adequate education to their children (Windisch, 2023.). Considering that the average household income at the end of 2023 was around €1400, providing quality education for children but a financial burden on families ('Bruttó 620 ezer forint volt az átlagkereset' 2024). A series of parents reiterated that extracurricular teachers play an essential role in preparing the children for entrance exams for secondary schools since the admission requirements have nothing to do with the primary school curriculum (Windisch, 2023.). Although being a solid substitute, this option is financially out of reach for many families. Only households with above-average income could afford such an endeavour. Therefore, this option is only valid for the upper-middle and upper classes. For many families, such a method could be the last effort to save the children from the horrors of public education and the future it promises.

The Hungarian education system is the most selective in the world, and this is not a rhetorical exaggeration, as the so-called PISA inclusion index clearly shows. It pushes children from different social backgrounds into various institutions, and there is a shocking gap between schools (Szabó, 2024.). Because selection amplifies the effect of family background, children from different backgrounds are placed in completely different learning paths: not even God can prevent children of higher status from entering higher education. In comparison, children of lower status are entirely excluded from the possibility of obtaining a degree.

Candidates can also gain many extra points by attending a preparatory course at the designated university. However, most of these university preparation courses require a fee. At the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME), participation in a baccalaureate preparation course of at least four months or at least 120 hours organised by the institution and successful completion is worth 60 points out of 100—the price of a creditable

preparatory course in one subject costs around EUR 200. The Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church offers a course; the certificate of completion costs EUR 130, giving students 100 out of 100 points (Csik, 2024.). The measures mentioned above support the selection and segregation of students in higher education institutions based on familial relations and socio-economic background.

CHAPTER 4 - DISCUSSION

Under the oversight of the chief patron, Viktor Orbán, some of his close clients have seen an insane growth of their wealth through gaining ownership of companies and receiving an abundance of public procurement tenders (Magyar & Madlovics, 2022.). As mentioned before, Orbán had the explicit goal of building a partnership between the state and these entrepreneurs to regain national sovereignty. However, these entrepreneurs have only a short-term interest in pursuing the accumulation of wealth. These companies, which have a low value added to the domestic economy, require only trained workers without skills (Körösenyi et al., 2020.). The restructuring of education mirrors the need for unskilled, trained labour. Most children can rely on the terrible public education that does not provide a decent future. The few who can escape public education join the clientelist upper or middle strata.

The selective process of education and the separation of the elite from the rest is unique. Although the Argentinian and the Hungarian elite reproduction systems favour a good socio-economic background, the Argentinian still has a decent level of meritocratic procedures. Additionally, it separates the economic elite from the political, while Orbán seeks to use his patronage as a melting pot for the two elite groups. The American elite reproduction is more similar to the Hungarian one because of the monumental prevalence of wealth in one's chances to participate in elite education. However, the crucial difference is that the American one is deeply embedded in neoliberalism. In Hungary, because of clientelism, the existence of a free market can not manifest. Otherwise, the chief patron would lose its essence, the lack of an alternative. The reproduction of the Hungarian elite under Orbán is unique because it has no historical or cultural roots. Its existence and purpose are based on Orbán's clientelism and utility in prolonging his reign. The education system supplies his loyal political elite that executes his politics. It supplies the economic elite under his direct control in the clientelist chain. Lastly, it also supplies the masses of unskilled and poorly

educated labour force that both provide legitimacy for his regime in periodical elections and cheap labour for the national economic elite.

CONCLUSION

The establishment of a clientelist state under the Orbán regime in Hungary, with Viktor Orbán at its apex, has fundamentally changed the state. In this structure, power and resources are centred in the hands of Orbán, who ensures his dominance by eliminating potential alternatives. Loyalty to Orbán is paramount for those within the patron-client chain. The transformation of the education system is part of a broader informal reconstruction of the state, blurring the lines between society and state and emphasising loyalty to Orbán over official positions. One of Orbán's long-term goals is to create a loyal elite aligned with his Christian-conservative vision, funded partly by EU money and facilitated by *ad personam* laws. The other is to regenerate the supply of unskilled workers, who can be manipulated into unwavering devotion to Viktor Orbán.

Significant changes in the education system have occurred since Viktor Orbán's return to power in 2010. Following the socialist-liberal coalition's defeat, Orbán's government implemented centralised control over education, reducing municipal autonomy and decreasing the age of compulsory education. This shift increased early school leaving among disadvantaged families, exacerbating social stratification. Education policies now emphasise Christian and nationalist values, focusing on maximising electoral power and elite interests. The quality of education has declined due to teacher shortages and a lack of specialised professionals, resulting in poor student performance in international assessments like PISA. Disadvantaged children face further challenges as vocational education neglects basic skills and financial support for social inclusion diminishes. The system fails to address diverse student needs, particularly those with special educational requirements, and the government dismisses the importance of professional support, advocating for parental responsibility instead. Overall, the reforms contribute to widening social inequalities and hindering educational attainment, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage.

The symbiotic relationship between the state and the church in Hungary, rooted in historical tradition, has intensified under Viktor Orbán's regime. Officials acknowledge a strategic partnership between the two entities, resulting in a surge of church-run schools, particularly in secondary education. This shift towards de-secularisation has led to a doubling of church-operated secondary schools and a notable increase in pupils attending religious institutions, especially in underprivileged regions and small towns. Consequently, this trend exacerbates school segregation, particularly disadvantaging children from marginalised backgrounds, such as Roma communities. The Catholic and Reformed churches have become pivotal in secondary education, with approximately a quarter of high school students enrolled in church-affiliated institutions. This process often prioritises higher-status children, further facilitating the imbalance in state schools.

In the Hungarian system, universities, influenced indirectly by the government, have the authority to allocate surplus points to students during the application process, thereby creating an arbitrary value system. Students enrolled in courses offered by Matthias Corvinus Collegium, associated with political figures close to Viktor Orbán, receive a disproportionately high number of surplus points compared to others. This phenomenon perpetuates social injustice as MCC, indirectly government-funded, offers quality education while serving as a tool for indoctrinating Christian-nationalist ideals. The collaboration between MCC and universities further reinforces selection, enabling children from privileged backgrounds to secure university placements despite their achievements. Meanwhile, universities like the University of Dunaújváros grant additional points to applicants with family ties to the institution, exacerbating elite reproduction and hindering social mobility.

There is a massive prevalence of extracurricular teachers in Hungary due to the declining quality of education, particularly noting their necessity for achieving satisfactory results in final exams. Interviews with parents reveal the financial burden of paying such

teachers, with costs reaching up to €500 per month for entrance exam preparation for one subject. This option, while practical, is financially inaccessible for most families.

Additionally, there is extreme selectivity in the Hungarian education system, which perpetuates social inequalities by funnelling children from different backgrounds into separate educational tracks. Moreover, attending fee-based preparatory courses at designated universities can provide students with extra points for university admissions, further exacerbating disparities based on familial connections and socio-economic status.

Existing research on Viktor Orbán often portrays him as a central figure in the shift towards authoritarianism in Hungary. Scholars have analysed Orbán's leadership style, political strategies, and the erosion of democratic norms and institutions during his tenure as Prime Minister. Orbán's consolidation of power, media control, and manipulation of the electoral system are frequently discussed topics. Additionally, the research delves into Orbán's nationalist and populist rhetoric, which often targets migrants, minorities, and perceived threats to Hungarian sovereignty. However, the informal transformation has been discussed on the surface and not in-depth with enough care. There is a gap in scrutinising the cultural shift and the transformation of the Hungarian society, as well as some of the methods that aid him in doing so. This thesis aims to fill in some of the gaps still uncovered to add to the structured knowledge of his reign and perhaps provide a future outlook on the length and characteristics of his leadership as well as the Hungarian society.

On the verge of the emergence of authoritarianism and the decline of democracy, it is crucial to understand how an authoritarian leader seeks to transform the state, society, culture and the entirety of the country to prolong their rule. Scrutinising how the Orbán regime reproduces inequalities through a selective process in the education system aids in understanding his rule better as a case study. Furthermore, it may help gain insight into discovering trends among countries that turn towards authoritarianism. In order to promote

democracy and democratic values, one must understand not only the formal ways of democratisation but other aspects of statecraft outside of the legislative, executive and judicial institutions.

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