

**Dominating the Right:
Post-Liberal National Conservatives in Hungary and the United States**

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Vienna, 09. 06. 2025.

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Abstract

Ruling right-wing parties in the United States and Hungary and their intellectual apparatuses increasingly identify as “post-liberal national conservative”. In this research I argue that the relationship between the two nations’ prominent right-wing academic and political figures has helped facilitate an ideational shift from previously hegemonic forms of conservatism to this new form of “post-liberal national conservatism”. Via sociological field theory I trace the coevolution of this ideational shift within American and Hungarian right-wing institutions, and explore the defining characteristics of this movement through identifying the ruptures between old conservatism and new conservatism. I contend that these defining characteristics can be grasped in 1) the post-liberal right’s preference for strong, personalized, and dynamic governing styles, which I analyze through the Weberian concept of plebiscitary leadership, and 2) their justificatory method for such governing styles in the form of a shared rejection of liberalism. I argue, furthermore, that the conflicts of interest that arise from the different geopolitical positions as well as from the dynamic interpretations of post-liberalism are navigated by American and Hungarian post-liberal national conservatives through the narrative of their two charismatic leaders’, Orbán and Trump’s “heroic” struggle to navigate the unpredictability of this transitional era between liberalism and post-liberalism.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
1.1 - Theoretical framework	1
1.1.1 - Aim of the thesis.....	1
1.1.2 - Structure.....	3
1.2 - Methodology.....	6
Chapter 2 - A Move Towards Plebiscitary Leader Democracies?	8
2.1 - Background.....	8
2.2 - Plebiscitary Leadership and Field Theory	13
2.2.1 - Weber's Concept	13
2.2.2 - Modern Applications and Application as Field Theory.....	15
2.3 - Nationalists Abroad - Semi-Structured Interviews.....	16
2.3.1 - The Settings	16
2.3.2 - A New Tide	22
2.3.3 - Democracy and effectiveness	24
2.3.4 - Charisma.....	28
2.3.5 - Knowledge Meets Power - Conclusion	32
Chapter 3 - Thin Constructivism a.k.a How Post-Liberals Operationalize Plebiscitarianism	34
3.1 - Background.....	34
3.2 - Framework.....	35
3.2.1 - Thin Constructivism	35
3.2.2 - The Appeal of Post-Liberalism.....	36
3.2.3 - Liberalism and Post-Liberalism as Empty Signifiers	38
3.3 - Discourses of Post-Liberalism.....	38
3.3.1 - Histories of Illiberalization: Hungary.....	38
3.3.2 - Histories of Illiberalization: Enters the US.....	41
3.3.3 - Descriptive Statements about the End of Liberalism.....	43
3.3.4 - Prescriptions for Post-Liberalism	48
3.3.5 - Rejection of Liberalism as Political Realism.....	50
3.4 - Conclusion.....	52
Chapter 4 - Plebiscitarianism as International Relations? What Theories of Connectivity Tell Us About Post-Liberals' Conceptions of the Political?.....	55
4.1 - Hungarian National Conservatives and Connectivity.....	55
4.1.1 - Connectivity as Plebiscitary Leadership on the International Level.....	55
4.1.2 - Connectivity as an Alternative for after the Collapse of Liberalism	57
4.2 - American National Conservatives on Connectivity.....	59

4.3 - Conclusion.....	62
Chapter 5 - Conclusion	64
5.1 - Summary.....	64
5.2 - Limitations.....	66
Bibliography	68

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 - Theoretical framework

1.1.1 - Aim of the thesis

The first 100 days of Donald Trump's second term introduced policies - such as the global tariff war, cutting of USAID, reconfiguration of alliances, and more aggressive diplomacy towards ally countries - that are widely understood to be markers of a paradigm shift and many talk about a new world order (Spetalnik et al, 2025). Discourse about a paradigm shift has very much been ongoing within the old and new intelligentsia of the conservative establishment in the United States. Many of the institutions included in the discourse consider the shift to be a "post-liberal" one (Deneen, 2018, 2024; Vermeule, 2020), meaning that its goal is to break with the norms and practices we associate with liberal democracies globally. Moreover, this shift is theorized by the right not merely as a "break with liberalism," but also as a rupture with previously hegemonic forms of right-wing thought in the US, such as neoconservatism, right-wing republicanism, or fusionism² (Hazony, 2022).³ In the beginning of a second Trump-administration, the new norms and practices of this movement are still being negotiated by different actors and interest groups on a global level, but a general identification with the label "post-liberal national conservatism" characterizes the hegemonic discourse on the American right today. The right-wing intelligentsia in the United States was not the first to adopt a post-liberal national conservative stance in their self-identification (Buzogány, Varga, 2019; Békés, 2020). In the following, I will look at how right-wing post-liberal discourses in Hungary preceded and shaped the discourse on the American right, and, consequently, how these discourses keep shaping each other today.

² These terms and the main differences will be defined in the following chapters.

³ As one of my interlocutors said: the election of Donald Trump changed the political and intellectual scenes in the US and it is getting more difficult to be successful in those fields on the American right when one does not reject neoconservatism in favor of some loosely defined post-liberal national conservatism.

This thesis looks at a number of phenomena to illustrate how US and Hungarian post-liberal discourses interact and influence one another: (1) right-wing “post-liberal” ideology in the US is still *in-the-making*, its factions are volatile and different interest groups are aspiring for dominance. As conservatism’s roots in the United States have so far laid with the traditions of the founding of the country, and so it has been strongly influenced by classical liberal ideals and republican-constitutionalist thought (Kirk, 2001; Meyer, 1962), the post-liberal intellectuals who aim to set the program are actively looking abroad for different ideological and governing models. (2) The Orbán-regime is trying to assert its influence on Trump’s inner circles and intellectual hinterland through think tanks, political influencers, and international conferences by positioning itself as the most successful model for post-liberal politicking, or, in other words, as the vanguard of the post-liberal paradigm-shift. (3) The synthesis of these two aspirations is an intense cooperation between US and Hungarian educational and political apparatuses.⁴

The significance of the relationship between Trump’s and Fidesz’s intellectual spheres is underscored by the scale and number of institutions, along with their staff, whose primary - if not exclusive - objective is to promote cooperation between their respective projects. The most important institutions taking part in sharing knowledge and negotiating the norms and practices of post-liberalism include Mathias Corvinus Collegium, the Danube Institute, the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, *Kommentár* Magazine, the Center for Fundamental Rights, and the Batthyányi Institute in Hungary, and the National Conservatism Conference, CPAC, the Heritage Foundation, the Claremont Institute, and the Edmund Burke Foundation in the US. The funding structure and lobbying power of these institutions make them capable of influencing discourse and policy in these respective countries.

⁴ This thesis mainly focuses on those (ideological or practical) elements of this relationship, that would markedly differentiate it from previously hegemonic conservative alliances. Elements that constitute clear continuities with neoconservatism or fusionism, such as strong allusions to “Christian morality” or a focus on the (white) nuclear family will not be the main concern.

Besides looking at how Hungarian and American post-liberalisms influence each other, this paper also scrutinizes some of the major contradictions arising from the dynamics and interactions between the political influencers of the two nations. One of the sources of these contradictions comes from the dynamism and fluidity (Körösényi et al, 2020) of post-liberal ideologies. I will argue in chapter 2 and 3 that one of the defining characteristics of Hungarian and American post-liberal national conservatism is that this ideology is a “radically open” “quasi-ideology” as opposed to a “closed” and static one (Ibid, 184-193; Freedon, 1996) meaning that political practice is difficult to predict based on strictly dogmatic ideological clues. The broadly understood (quasi-)ideology is that it is not driven by abstract principles but by pragmatic necessities. This can result in contradictory policy solutions and foreign policy approaches by a global superpower and a small Eastern European country⁵, including different approaches to free trade and who to trade with. The aim here is to explore the nature of these contradictions and, specifically, *how these contradictions are negotiated*. I am going to argue that a common narrative about a loosely interpreted (global) hegemonic transition⁶ (Arrighi, Silver, 2001; Arrighi, 2010; Gagy, 2018, 2019), or, in right-wing discourse, “the collapse of the liberal world order” helps smooth out these contradictions by justifying ideological dynamism with the unpredictability of the transitionary period in which they claim we live.

1.1.2 - Structure

In chapter 2, I introduce the concepts of plebiscitary leader democracy and charismatic plebiscitary leadership (Körösényi; 2020) to describe Hungarian and American post-liberal national conservative approaches to governing style and to legitimizing power. I detect this

⁵ The purposes of this thesis do not require a strict taxonomization of Hungary, and therefore, the description of its geopolitical position is kept vague. “Semi-periphery” or “Dependent Development State” would be the closest to the author’s preference, but the political-economic and sociological refinements that these terms would necessitate would require an unnecessary amount of space in this thesis.

⁶ Which Arrighi theorizes as a historically recurring cycle in which the global hegemon who replaced material accumulation as its primary source of wealth with financial accumulation is dethroned by powers who can still rely on material accumulation as their primary source of wealth.

approach to be a novelty (compared to neoconservative approaches which tend to favor more static, ‘constitutional’ governance [Stedman Jones, 2014]) that was theoretically developed in Hungary earlier than in the United States. Furthermore, I argue that this approach is a large part of what makes Hungarian conservatism so attractive to American post-liberals.

In chapter 3, I take a look at how plebiscitary leadership is operationalized and justified through descriptive statements about the end of liberalism and prescriptive sentiments about right-wingers’ need to accelerate its downfall. I argue, based on my interviews and the analyzed discourses, that such descriptive and prescriptive statements are shared by conservatives who are in positions of power, which is testimony to the success of this discourse. I look at this phenomenon of descriptive and prescriptive post-liberal ideology through the concept of thin-constructivism (Kováts, 2019; Marsh, 2010; Furlong-Marsh, 2010), which I will use in two senses: in the first meaning, to explain the success of these discourses by the inadequacy of liberal discourses to describe political realities, and, in the second meaning to describe the discourse as thin or empty, as ‘liberalism’ and ‘post-liberalism’ do not have fixed meanings in post-liberal discourses. The use of the terms ‘liberalism’ and ‘post-liberalism’ as empty signifiers (signifying different objects that can be referred to interchangeably in right-wing discourse, with other terms such as ‘liberal democracy’, ‘neoliberalism’, ‘woke’, ‘bureaucracy’, ‘gender ideology’, etc.) has 3 major functions: (1) it creates a sense of (a negative) community through a joint standing up against a common enemy, even when the nomenclature refers to different objects in reality, (2) as discussed in the populism literature (Enyedi, 2016), it makes room for crisis discourses that maintain a constant campaign burst mode, and (3) the fluidity of the meaning of liberalism and its resistance by post-liberal national conservatives fits the dynamic approach of plebiscitary leadership to power well, resisting, this way, not only the fixity of institutional processes, but also that of abstractions and principles.

Lastly, I argue that the fact of the successful mainstreaming of this post-liberal narrative in Hungary is used by US conservatives to normalize it back home.

In chapter 4, I describe ways in which, especially Hungarian, post-liberals think about the role of post-liberal national conservative leaders in terms of international relations. To do this, I utilize the concept of plebiscitary leadership style and the end-of-liberalism narrative to look at the tension between Fidesz's general approach of "connectivity" which justifies trade with all the great powers via the concept of "keystone state" (Orbán, 2024; Roa, 2022), and the US's own hegemonic interests and its imposed tariffs on the EU. I argue that plebiscitary conceptions of legitimacy and the end-of-liberalism narrative help overcome the contradicting interests of the two national conservative movements in their normalization of the acceleration of liberal transnational institutions and their self-positioning as global leaders pioneering a future world order.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize the main arguments and limitations of this thesis.

Throughout the entire thesis, I provide an analysis of the institutional networks of Hungarian and American post-liberal national conservatives and the evolution of their thinking through sociological field theory (Buzogány, Varga, 2019).

I define Fidesz and Trumpian Republicans as radical right parties based on Kováts's taxonomy of Fidesz and AfD (2022). These are right wing parties inasmuch as they naturalize, and, occasionally, hail inequality (Bobbio, 1996) and exclusion from particular groups (Erçetin, Boyraz, 2022), or, in more philosophical terms, they deem the existence of separations as natural and necessary (Tamás, 2021); and they are radical inasmuch as they oppose the status quo, which is liberal democracy (Kováts, 2022; Mudde, 2007). For analytical clarity, post-liberal national conservatism needs this definitional adage besides its plebiscitarianism and rejection of liberalism, as these terms in and of themselves would not be exclusive to the right.

While not the focus of this thesis, the following chapters will include evidence about these parties' hierarchization of those it deems to be part of "the nation" above those it does not, i.e. its naturalization of inequalities. As for their opposition of liberal democracy as a status quo: this thesis will provide ample evidence for it in the discussions in the following chapters.

1.2 - Methodology

This thesis relies on semi-structured elite interviews, thematic discourse analysis, institutional analysis, and limited observational fieldwork.

I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with (overwhelmingly Hungarian and American) academics, journalists, researchers, and political influencers who 1) are involved in the work of institutions with strong post-liberal national conservative identities, *and* who 2) have engaged in building Hungarian and American conservative relations individually or through their institutions. While most of my interlocutors agreed to having their name used in this thesis, I decided to use them only where it contributed to the argument or where contextual information made it obvious. The fact that most of my interlocutors are publicly known figures or at least have had their thoughts published gave me an opportunity to prepare and ask more personalized questions through their fields of expertise, be that political philosophy, law, or religious studies, instead of a survey-style analysis with sample questions. Furthermore, I separated answers from American and Hungarian interlocutors in cross-case analyses, looking for similarities and contradictions in specific topics (Beamer, 2002).

My main aim with the elite interviews was to process-trace ideational shifts in US and Hungarian right-wing institutions through individual experiences (Hochschild, 2009). I utilized institutional analysis as well as sociological field theory to look at the ideological evolution and later co-evolution of Hungarian and American post-liberal institutions and the individuals they comprise of, as well as how their intellectual environment shaped them and how they shaped their intellectual environment (Buzogány, Varga, 2019). The elite interviews also gave

me an insight into how these actors identify themselves, their groups, and how they perceive the significance of their work through experiences that have not been otherwise publicly communicated. I looked at the relationship between shifts in institutional structures and funding, the wider political environment, and ideational shifts in individuals' and groups' self-perception.

Through thematic discourse analysis, I looked at foundational and programmatic texts by Hungarian and American post-liberal institutions, political influencers, or politicians, including speeches by Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump. Utilizing frame analysis (Kováts, 2022) and thin constructivism (Kováts, 2022; Marsh, 2010), and relying on primarily Hungarian and American literatures and discourse on post-liberalism, I looked at how Hungarian and American post-liberal national conservatives frame and interpret 1) charismatic leadership, 2) democracy and legitimacy to rule, 3) descriptive post-liberalism, and 4) prescriptive post-liberalism. I did this to parse the main ideological glues that hold Hungarian and American post-liberal interest groups together, and to see how emerging contradictions are navigated narratively.

Chapter 2 - A Move Towards Plebiscitary Leader Democracies?

2.1 - Background

In 2024, at the National Conservatism (NatCon, in the following) Conference in Brussels, Yoram Hazony, one of the conference's founders, had a discussion with Viktor Orbán. He referred back to Orbán's comments in his discussion at NatCon Rome 2020: "[The interviewer] asked you (...): 'Look, the national conservative movement, it's lacking a powerful leadership, and perhaps it's Hungary's time to take the leadership to be an example to this movement in many other countries.' I remember very well that you said: 'Look, Hungary is a small country at the edge of Europe, and leadership in such a big enterprise will have to come from France or Britain or from Italy, from some major country.' In the meantime, it seems as though Hungary has actually stepped forward" (Orbán, Hazony, 2024).⁷ On May 29-30th 2025 at CPAC Hungary, Orbán did pose in front of conservative politicians from all over the world just like some sort of a national conservative "coach". He pointed out their points of strength, assured them of his support, and acknowledged their grievances.⁸ NatCon is the biggest international event for national conservative politicians and pundits, and it is an enterprise which claims that "the future of conservatism [is] inextricably tied to the idea of the nation" (NatCon website). It was founded by the mainly Anglo-American board members of the Edmund Burke Foundation and among its biggest sponsors are the Hungarian Danube Institute and Mathias Corvinus Collegium. CPAC Hungary was the first international iteration of the biggest American conservative conference. The questions arise: What is this movement that Hazony claims 'Hungary' has stepped forward to lead? Why is Orbán being equated with

⁷ (Victor Orbán Interview with Yoram Hazony | We Need Change In Brussels | NatCon Brussels 2). For the referenced interview, see (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán: Interview with Chris DeMuth | NatCon Rome 2020).

⁸ Among others, he made such gestures towards Santiago Abascal, Geert Wilders, Irakli Kobakhidze, and Herbert Kickl. The "coach" comparison is Ambrus Ittész's, who is one of the editors at Partizán Media.

Hungary? And, how did Orbán come to be conceived as the leader of such an international nationalist movement?

NatCon emerged as one of the most important events for conservative (mostly American) thinkers who claimed that conservatism needed some sort of refreshment, a rebranding (Hazony, 2022). Among the signers of its statement of principles are some of the most influential figures of conservatives from the US and elsewhere, including the tech-billionaire Peter Thiel, influencers from the biggest right-wing media conglomerates such as the Daily Wire, or from think tanks like the Heritage Foundation. Hazony, the chief founder of the movement, has claimed that previously mainstream conservative forces in the US and elsewhere no longer represented conservative values. He especially blamed the rightist libertarian wing of the so-called fusionist consensus of conservatism (Hazony, 2018). Fusionism refers to the intellectual, economic, and political cooperation between different factions of the American right, which started in the 1960s. It primarily describes a strategic, historical cooperation between traditionalist conservatives, evangelicals, and acolytes of the Chicago-school right-wing libertarian movement (whose most notable member is Milton Friedman) and wealthy businessmen. Frank Meyer, writer of the *National Review* is widely regarded to be the intellectual engineer behind this alliance of different factions whose strategic common grounds were anticommunism and laissez faire economics (Tanenhaus, 2009; Stedman Jones, 2014; Ganz 2024). Hazony claims that the validity of such a cooperation has expired at the end of the Cold War, as its historical task was to defeat communism. Since then, according to him, the focus of right-wing libertarianism on shrinking the power of the state necessarily entailed the weakening of the power of conservative politics (Hazony, 2022). “Reviving the state”, therefore, has been among the biggest goals, not only for the national conservatives who signed but other conservative factions who claim to have broken with the fusionist consensus (Borg, 2024; Vermeule, 2022; Deneen, 2018).

While post-fusionist conservative movements in the US have not all been followers of a “statist” turn, as the 1990s and early 2000s anti-establishment radical right could mostly be characterized by radical libertarian fringe groups such as the Minuteman Project and other paramilitary groups⁹ (Blumenthal, 2010; Neiwert, 2017; Ganz, 2024), the election of Donald Trump resulted in a new era of theorizing the role of the state. One of my interlocutors called it the “emergence of intellectual Trumpism”, and another claimed a post-fusionist turn among the biggest American conservative think tanks including the Heritage Foundation and the Claremont Institute.

Hungary, which delegates the biggest faction of non-Anglo-Saxons to Natcon, is widely regarded as a “laboratory” (Dreher, 2023) for national conservatives and post-liberals for “reclaiming” the state. But what does this “reclaiming” mean? How do post-liberal national conservatives look at the role and functioning of the state? How is it different from fusionist neoconservative conceptions of it? Why is Hungary a “test-ground”, as one of my interlocutors referred to it?

When talking about reviving the state, post-liberal national conservatives do not mean the recentralization of social services or countering rising inequalities under neoliberal regimes. While some policy measures in Hungary that are celebrated by American conservatives (Dreher, 2024) might be considered as diverging from neoliberal “non-interventionist” approaches, such as a number pro-natalist and pro-white middle class measures (Geva, 2021), they are hardly measures for top-down redistribution of wealth that would fundamentally shake neoliberal structures (Scheiring, Szombati, 2020). While it potentially *could* mean that, based on the interviews and discourses I analyzed, reviving the state is understood among post-liberal national conservatives in a more meta way and refers to a desire to build governing structures

⁹ The Minutemen Project was a group of armed individuals engaging in “border watches” to confront “illegal immigrants”.

in which personalized leadership has the ability to make rapid and substantial decisions without bureaucratic and ideological constraints.

In Hungary, the theoretical bases of such a thinking that refers to itself as “political realist” (Lánczi, 2015), and which follows Schmittian concepts to advocate for the “primacy of the political” (G. Fodor, 2010; Schmitt, 2007) were laid out in the late 1990s and early 2000s, mainly at the research institute Századvég (Buzogány, Varga, 2019), but grew increasingly influential through the 2010s. Márton Békés, having written a programmatic overview of the party’s history (Békés, 2022), is one of the most important ideologues of Fidesz today. Békés talks of a “conservative revolution” which advocates for strong state power, the natural consequence of which, he argues, is the “primacy of the political” over bureaucratic proceduralism and ideational abstractions (Békés, 2022). Békés has been criticized by non-Fidesz supporter conservative thinkers for not being a “real conservative” (Körösenyi, 2022) to which Békés’s answer is a quote from István Bethlen, Hungarian prime minister in the early 20th century: “conservatism is not party program, but method” (Békés, 2022). This is also the sentiment of *Kommentár*, the classical liberal-turned-conservative revolutionary high-brow political-philosophy magazine whose chief editor is Békés, and which is written by and for the Fidesz intelligentsia today. This approach appears in Viktor Orbán’s longer speeches, as well, which are often programmatic and delineate longer-term ambitions. In a speech in 2012, he said it straightforwardly that politicians should not have to bow to “abstract principles and institutions” (Orbán-speech, 07. 28. 2012.).

In the US one can also detect an emergence of intellectual factions that advocate for different understandings of the political. Among the most notable ones are Adrian Vermeule and Eric Posner, legal scholars. Vermeule and Posner have both argued for “common good constitutionalism”, which, among other things, is a critique of both progressive and originalist understandings of the US constitution. They argue for a broader originalist understanding,

which supposes that the intention of the founders was to lay out a system which allows for the flexible implementation of “common good” politics (Vermeule, 2022). In their critique of neoconservative worries about too much power being accumulated by the executive, they argue that strong leadership today is indispensable (Vermeule, Posner, 2011). Vermeule is a regular visitor of Hungary, has been a guest lecturer at MCC, and is a friend of Balázs Orbán, political director of Viktor Orbán. Vermeule gained fame in 2016, when he announced his conversion to Catholicism and is now widely regarded as the most important legal theoretician of the post-liberal right.¹⁰

This common strand of strong and flexible leadership is detectable in the cooperation between Hungarian and American research institutes and think tanks whose purpose is to bridge the academic and the political worlds. Most notably, politicians from Fidesz are recurring guests at the biggest conservative think tanks in the US, the Heritage Foundation¹¹, which, in 2024, gained larger notoriety for its Project 2025 plan, Trump’s election program that was widely controversial and contested (even by Trump himself, occasionally). Project 2025 promoted an expanded version of “unitary executive theory” aiming to give the President more power not only over the executive branch but also over the legislative and the judiciary (Knutson, 2025).

In the following, I am going to argue that the framework of plebiscitary leader democracy, or plebiscitary leadership is better at describing the nature of such governing styles and approaches to the legitimacy of power than the populism literature or regime-classification literature. In the next sub-section, I give an overview of the plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD or plebiscitary leadership from now on) literature based mostly on Max Weber’s original theory and Körösenyi et al’s (2020) advances on the literature. After that I provide insight into right-

¹⁰ He is most famous for his “Catholic integralism” thesis, in which he advocates against the separation of state and church in Catholic majority countries.

¹¹ One notable such case was in 2024 when Orbán flew to Washington DC to meet Trump and give a speech at Heritage Foundation’s headquarter (Michel, newrepublic.com, 2024).

wing discourse about governing style relying on my interviews and discourse analysis through the main concepts of 1) democracy, 2) charismatic leadership, and 3) effectiveness. In this section, I provide further evidence for the interconnection of American and Hungarian conservatism and Orbán's influence on American conservatives when it comes to governing style.

2.2 - Plebiscitary Leadership and Field Theory

2.2.1 - Weber's Concept

The concept of plebiscitary democracy was coined by Max Weber towards the end of his life (and theorized by him between 1917 and 1920). It refers to a governing style in which, in Weber's characterization, the source of the leader's legitimacy is his *charisma* and the *democratic mandate* (Körösenyi, 2019; Weber, 2019.). This is one of Weber's pure types of legitimate rule besides traditional and rational (Weber, 2019; Magalhães, 2021). Weber's definition of charisma is the following: "the exceptional sanctity or heroic qualities or exemplary character of a person, and of the orders that this person proclaims or creates" (Weber, 2019, 342). Modern scholars of Weber contrast this idea to liberal pluralist ideals of legitimacy and rule: as opposed to rational-legalistic (or rational choice) justifications for liberal pluralism, where democratic politics are imagined to be managed between the suppliers of ideologies and policy solutions (parties) and the demand side for these ideologies or policy solutions (the voters), providing the basis for rational cooperation between different interest groups in a society (Downs, 1957), the charismatic justification for rule demands complete faith in (or rejection of) the ability of the plebiscitary type leader to make decisions on their own, often independent from the public's sentiments about specific policies (Körösenyi, 2019). This often results in a "blank mandate" (Körösenyi, 2020), which authorizes the leader to make decisions not based on campaign promises but rather on their supposed extraordinary ability to

react to events or crises the right way through their intimate and profound knowledge of their people's character and needs.

This deep knowledge and the “natural born” leader's devotion to the craft of politics as a vocation is what gives them a surplus legitimacy over simple administrative officials: while “leaders will act according to their own judgement and feel personally responsible for the consequences of their actions,” “bureaucrats (...) will perceive themselves to be acting under the instructions of their electors, without a sense of personal commitment and responsibility” (Magalhães, 2021, 74), in Weber's conviction. That is why parliamentary functions in plebiscitary democracies ought to be reduced, according to Weber, to holding the leader accountable (through the right to inquiry, for example, which Weber advocated for) (Kilker, 1989).

For Weber, this was not simply a descriptive observation of some European systems he perceived to be plebiscitary leader democracies, but he rather used plebiscitary and charismatic leadership in a normative sense, believing, contrary to Marx, that the most important separation in capitalism was not that between workers and the means of production but rather that between “the administrative staff and the means of administration” (Magalhães, 2021). These convictions were, to a great extent, the result of Weber's observations about a “parliamentary paralysis at the time of a national crisis” (Kilker, 1989, 447.). Weber, in this context, believed in a reformation of bureaucratic structures so that they are more malleable under charismatic rule, “the specifically creative revolutionary force of history” (Weber, 1978, 1117, 1978) in order to prevent the hollowing out and arbitrary functioning of bureaucratic structures.

The literature calls this a “minimalist” conception of democracy (Körösenyi et al, 2020), and describes Weber's approach as a “political realist” one, as he viewed politics “as a permanent power struggle that is mainly about the ‘who should rule’ question and less about the substantive problems of public policy” (Ibid, 2020, 41-42).

2.2.2 - Modern Applications and Application as Field Theory

The modern literature on the concept of plebiscitary leader democracy tends to use the label in a more critical manner. While this thesis also approaches plebiscitary leadership from a critical standpoint, I argue in agreement with Körösényi et al (2020), Kováts (2022), and Scheiring (2020) that the advantage of theoretical frameworks such as plebiscitary leader democracy over literatures on populism (Enyedi, 2016) or regime-classification literatures (Batory, 2016) is that they do not approach the populist or illiberal systems under scrutiny as deformations of an ideal-type, but rather as systems and as approaches with their own distinct characteristics.

Currently, there is a renaissance in the literature of the concept of plebiscitary leader democracy. Körösényi et al's (2020) seminal work on the Orbán-regime as a plebiscitary leader democracy¹² is the other work, besides Weber's, this chapter primarily builds on. However, while Körösényi describes a model of governing through examples of mostly policy and legal history, this thesis is mainly interested in exploring right-wing *discourses and sentiments about* power, governing, and the source of legitimacy through my Hungarian and American examples. In that sense, my approach is closer to sociological field theory in that it aims to explore the dynamics of the relationship between Hungarian and American post-liberal national conservatives through a “relational approach to understanding how actors interact with one another” (Klutz, Fligstein, 2016, 186-187) and to look at how in “socially constructed arenas” actors “frame their actions and identities vis-à-vis one another” through “common practice, institution, issue or goal” and “shared meanings, rules, and norms that guide their interactions” (Ibid). Fligstein, furthermore, emphasizes “agentic capacities” in social fields with which

¹² Körösényi, Illés, and Gyulai delineate 6 characteristics of the Orbán-regime through the concept of plebiscitary leader democracy: charismatic leadership, demagoguery and populism, plebiscitary representation, crisis discourse, the radical nature of public policy, and a patrimonial practice of power (2020). I could not find similarly systematic applications of the concept on the Trump administration, which could be a worthwhile topic for further research. That, however, is far outside the scope of this thesis, which focuses on the sentiments about power, governing, leadership, and the source of legitimacy within Orbán's and Trump's intellectual circles through the concept of plebiscitary leader democracy, and not in the practical application of the concept in governing.

individuals can accumulate various forms of social or material capital to “exert power over others” (Ibid). Buzogány and Varga relied on sociological field theory to analyze the intellectual evolution of Hungarian conservatism since the 1990s (2018). My contribution to their analysis is twofold: first, I extend the analysis of the intellectual underpinnings of post-liberal national conservatism (what they refer to as illiberalism) to see the ways in which ideas diffuse within Hungarian and American post-liberal circles and how meanings and status are inferred in this relational way, and secondly, I use the concepts of plebiscitary leadership in chapter 2, and descriptive and prescriptive post-liberalisms as well as thin constructivism in chapter 3 to better conceptualize this intellectual evolution and provide newer historical context.

2.3 - Nationalists Abroad - Semi-Structured Interviews

2.3.1 - The Settings

In this subsection I introduce the three main institutions with which most of my interlocutors were involved one way or another: Mathias Corvinus Collegium, the Danube Institute, and the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. These serve in this analysis as nodes to the complex web of Hungarian and American post-liberal relations.

I met one of my first interviewees, a guest lecturer in Mathias Corvinus Collegium’s Scruton Café, as I did most of my other interlocutors for this research. MCC is the largest private educational institution in Hungary which also receives the largest amounts of government subsidies.¹³ In its statement of principles, MCC claims that it is “[i]deologically neutral, but not short of values” followed by its commitment to “actively contribute to the formation of a[n] (...) internationally experienced, patriotic generation” that will become “a worthy representative of Hungary's cultural, economic and social elite” (MCC website). The

¹³ Notably, in 2021, it received 500 billion HUF, which is more than what was spent on the entire higher education sector that year (Weiler, Telex, 2023).

“talent management” institution has real estate in most county seat cities and shares in Richter and MOL, two multi-national corporations close to Fidesz (Czinkóczy, 2020). The chairman of MCC’s board of trustees is Balázs Orbán, Viktor Orbán’s political director, and its chief director is Zoltán Szalai who also happens to be chief editor of Hungary’s biggest national conservative newspaper, Mandiner, which started as part of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (CEPMF), Fidesz’s media empire.

MCC’s “ideological neutrality” comes under further question when one takes a look at its publications, and the influence of right-wing politics from the US becomes tangible: among their books, one can find titles by Frank Furedi, Hungarian-American sociologist, who is a regular speaker at the National Conservatism Conference, Vivek Ramaswamy, Republican entrepreneur and shortly part of Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) writing about a “*Woke Rt.*”, Joshua Mitchell, whose sociological analysis argues against “woke identity politics”, Nicholas Tate making a case for conservative education, or Thomas Sowell, Chicago School libertarian economist. Hungarian authors include Gergely Böszörményi-Nagy, head of Brain Bar, (the famous tech conference whose guests have included Jordan Peterson, conservative “star” psychologist and part of the right-wing “Intellectual Dark Web” or Peter Thiel, the Trumpist tech-billionaire,) János Zoltán Csák, Minister of Culture and Innovation writing about the “American genius,” and Balázs Orbán, Political Director of the prime minister whose books *The Hungarian Way of Strategy* and *Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy of Connectivity* are available in English and in Hungarian and are regularly showcased in American conservative conferences including the National Conservatism Conference or CPAC. Broader themes that MCC Press’s books deal with include post-liberalism, anti-communism, a critique of “woke” and trans rights activism, nationalism and what it means to be a conservative.

These themes are further explored at MCC's biggest yearly event, MCC Feszt, a 4-day-long political festival in different locations of Hungary. MÚEA, the public-private foundation between the state and MOL has been a recurring funder of the event (Rugli, 2024). The festival has been a parade of American right-wing influencers since its start in 2021: the most famous guests have included Tucker Carlson ex-Fox News reporter, who is now a recurring interviewer of Viktor Orbán in the Carmelite Monastery, Jordan Peterson, self-help author and a host at Daily Wire, one of the biggest right-wing media conglomerates in the US, Michael Knowles, also an author and host at Daily Wire, who in his speech at MCC Feszt defended Viktor Orbán's identification of Hungary as an illiberal democracy,¹⁴ John McEntee, former Trump advisor and Tiktok-influencer, who insisted that Hungary is nothing like the "right-wing hellscape" he claimed liberal media pictures it, Christopher Rufo, anti-woke influencer and researcher at the Manhattan Institute, and many others from institutions like the conservative think tank, PragerU, Fox News, Rebel Media, and many segments of the American right. As for Hungarians, people from MCC, Mandiner, Kommentár, and other institutions from CEPMF present themselves at the festival.

MCC can also boast about a formidable number of American conservative guest professors and lecturers including Jordan Peterson, Dennis Prager, Patrick Deneen, Yoram Hazony, Sohrab Ahmari, all of whom are crucial figures in the post-liberal or national conservative spheres of the American new right, many of whom appear on the opening webpage of the institution.

¹⁴ Knowles's "book" of 245 empty pages titled Reasons to Vote for Democrats was published in Hungary by the Hungarian think tank, the Center for Fundamental Rights. The Center for Fundamental Rights is funded by the government through the nonprofit, Batthyány Lajos Foundation. Not all of the details of this funding is public, for what is now common practice in Hungary, that government money flowing through endowments and foundations "lose their public character" (Piroska, 2021). The Center for Fundamental Rights and its director general, Miklós Szánthó are the ones responsible for organizing the now annual CPAC Hungary. CPAC Hungary was the first international iteration of the biggest conservative political event in the US since Ronald Reagan's initiation.

As for the Scruton Café, which is located in MCC's main building: the "traditionalist" conservative philosopher has long been among the favorites of high-brow Hungarian right-wingers. The philosopher was a close friend of Viktor Orbán, who, in 2019, awarded him with the Commander's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit, for his "loyalty" to Hungarians (Orbán-speech, 2019). Scruton, especially later in his life, turned into a sort of precursor to the post-liberal movement in the US, with prizes bearing his name now being given to people like Jordan Peterson.¹⁵ Scruton's works are now being published and translated into Hungarian by MCC Press, and Scruton cafés are appearing in most Libri bookstores, Hungary's biggest bookstore franchise, as MCC bought it in 2023. (It is not a coincidence that memes about "iLLibri" promptly flooded the Internet after the buyout.)

This was the setting I conducted most of my interviews in. The first of my interlocutors, Titus Techera is also a visiting lecturer of MCC, as well as the executive director of the American Cinema Foundation. He has been teaching political philosophy at MCC for a bit over a year. Mr. Techera is a member of the American Edmund Burke Foundation and the International Programs Coordinator of the foundation's project, National Conservatism whose goal is to gather post-liberal national conservative speakers to its annual or occasionally biannual event, the NatCon Conference. Techera is also a good friend of Yoram Hazony, a friend of Viktor Orbán. When I asked him how he ended up working at MCC, he responded that his good friend, Christopher Rufo, suggested that he get in touch with Balázs Orbán.

Which brought me to the other set of institutions where some of my interlocutors work. Rufo is a recurring guest and speaker at MCC Feszt as well as the National Conservatism Conference. He is one of the "star" conservatives in America whose bouts with Harvard's president that eventually led to her resignation won him international fame. But his main connection to Hungary was through his participation in a 6-week exchange program in Hungary

¹⁵ See the Roger Scruton Prize by the Common Sense Society.

at Danube Institute receiving 35 thousand dollars in exchange for hosting two lectures on the topics of “critical race theory” and “LGBTQ propaganda” and writing two positive articles about Hungarian government politics, which he did, one on his own Substack and one in the “post-liberal” Compact Magazine. Other visiting American fellows have also been commissioned to write similar articles about Hungary, including Rod Dreher among the most notable ones, who is the “Director of Network Project” according to Danube’s own website. His contracts have included “conducting negotiations,” holding conferences and maintaining relationships with “thinkers,” and writing articles about “his experiences in Hungary in the American media” (Zubor, 2023).

The Danube Institute is an important organization when it comes to Hungarian-American right-wing relations. It is a think tank that is officially a branch of the Batthány Lajos Foundation (a “public trust fund” through which the government can fund far-right institutions, such as the Center for Fundamental Rights, Megafon, or Kommentár, or events such as CPAC Hungary). Danube’s president and founder is John O’Sullivan, former advisor to Margaret Thatcher and once editor of National Review, the once biggest conservative magazine in the United States most commonly associated with the conservative fusionist movement of the 1950s that aimed to revitalize conservatism. O’Sullivan moved to Budapest in 2014 when he founded the Danube Institute. In 2015, he edited a book titled *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. In its introduction, he questions the image that arose about Orbán as an autocrat and claims to provide a “calm,” “unbiased” overview of the evolution of Orbán and Orbánism (O’Sullivan, Pócza, 2015).¹⁶

According to the Institute’s mission statement, its aim is to “encourag[e] the transmission of ideas and people within the countries of Central Europe and between Central

¹⁶ The book’s sentiment, however, is largely a positive one that defends Orbán’s “illiberal state” thesis in its substance, and builds on it, while mostly criticizing the nomenclature, claiming that it is unnecessarily inviting to criticism, comparing it to Margaret Thatcher’s “there is no such thing as a society” claim. O’Sullivan accords this formulation to Orbán’s “spontaneous genius”.

Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world.” It goes on to explain that besides conservatism, classical liberal economics, and “realistic Atlanticism,” the Institute’s newest commitment is to “exploring and extending the related concepts of democracy and patriotism.” According to them, the best foundation for democracy are the nation-states, which should be the building blocks of a “democratic internationalism.” They are committed to transmit these ideas through establishing research groups, encouraging exchange programs for “scholars, political leaders, and cultural figures through international conferences and exchange fellowships” in Hungary, and organizing conferences and panel discussions (Danube Institute).

Another set of my interviewees were from this institution, including Carlos Roa who has been working for the institute since 2023. He is a young national conservative, in his own description, who attended almost all of the NatCon conferences. He was a fellow at the Claremont Institute¹⁷ as well and came to Hungary in 2022 to report on the elections. He wrote an article to the magazine, *Hungarian Conservative*, in which he introduced the term “keystone state” to describe Hungary’s geopolitical potential. The term caught Balázs Orbán’s eyes to the extent that he originally wanted the title of his book, *Hussar Cut* to be *Keystone State* (more on this later). A year later he went back to Hungary to attend MCC Feszt, where he was offered a role at the Danube Institute. He is also a visiting researcher at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

Other interlocutors of mine, including Philip Pilkington were the other way around: they were researchers at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs or MCC and visiting researchers at the Danube Institute, which indicates strong cooperation between the institutions. The Hungarian Institute of International Affairs (MKI from now on referring to the Hungarian

¹⁷ The Claremont Institute is a right-wing think tank that was founded in 1979. Its writers have been described as “West-Coast Straussians” (Borg, 2024), and one of their goals is to “revitalize the right after a generation of decay”: <https://www.claremont.org/revitalizing-the-right-after-a-generation-of-decay/>. The institute has good ties with J. D. Vance and Donald Trump.

acronym of Magyar Külügyi Intézet) is a state-owned nonprofit research center and think tank. As such, ownership tasks are exercised by the prime minister's political director, Balázs Orbán. Its current president is Gladden J. Pappin. Pappin is the co-founder of the conservative quarterly journal, *American Affairs*, as well as the Substack *Post-Liberal Order* which has editors such as Patrick Deneen or Adrian Vermeule. Pappin moved to Budapest as a visiting fellow at MCC and now is the president and chair of the board at the MKI. Pilkington, my interlocutor, followed him there, after they worked together in different American organizations on “intellectual Trumpism.”

2.3.2 - A New Tide

When I asked Techera about his background, he told me about the time he spent in US think tanks, including the Claremont Institute, a fact he was very proud of. He mentioned that before Donald Trump's presidential campaign, Claremont used to be what he would describe as a “fusionist” institution, the sort that he is highly critical of.¹⁸

Mr. Techera, as well most of the rest of my interlocutors deem the fusionist alliance of “paleo-conservatives”, anti-communists, and - and this last group is whom he has reservations about - economic libertarians along with “globalist” neoconservatives, an alliance whose legitimacy has expired after the end of the Cold War. Post-liberals and national conservatives widely share this notion, arguing that in their attempt to minimize state intervention, the fusionists lost their conservative, traditionalist identity and what remained was mere individualism (Hazony 2018, 2022; Deneen 2018, 2023;). But, Mr. Techera added, Claremont was one of the first institutions to back Trump's candidacy and became what the *Atlantic* called “the intellectual home of America's Trumpist right” (Green, 2021), and later on, basically all the big conservative think tanks gave in, went on to support him, and “replaced fusionism with an ‘America First’ attitude.”

¹⁸ For the meaning of fusionism, see chapter 2.1.

Amira's study shows that Trump's effect on the label "conservatism" has been that members of Congress who support Trump are seen by control groups as more "conservative" or more "right-wing" than members of Congress who do not support him. She explains this as a charismatic leader's ability "to change public perception of what 'conservatism' means and who is considered 'conservative'" (Amira, 2022, 1). The tendency was apparent among my interlocutors as well: the minority who were somewhat critical of Trump, tended to describe themselves as more center-right, as opposed to the majority of those supporting him, who considered themselves more right-wing. According to my interlocutors, "never-Trumpers" found themselves on the fringe not only in politics,¹⁹ but in academic circles as well. This was partly due to the significant academic and political work that had already been put into the thematization of different ruptures in politics (see Hazony's, Deneen's, and Vermeule's work on shifting the divides from state vs capital to "the people" vs "corrupt bureaucrats"), and partly due to Trump's electoral successes that brought about the real intellectual shift in these think tanks.

Similar sentiments were expressed by other interlocutors of mine about Fidesz's redefining what it means to be on the right and then dominating the conservative scene, especially after their first term (1998-2002). According to one of my Hungarian interlocutors, a program manager of one of the college's workshops, Fidesz's great achievement after the regime-change was partly the introduction of "citoyen", conservative, right-wing politics and culture to Hungary, and partly to dominate this emerging field of the political right. They first introduced political conservatism into the mainstream in 1995 after decades of the so-called

¹⁹ The final blow to the so-called Never Trump conservative movement, according to its remaining participants, was Nikki Haley's dropout from the Republican primaries, but that was preceded by many of the members "bending the knee" to the 45th and now 47th president of the United States. See more: <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/03/13/never-trumpers-gop-2024-elections-00146726> Perhaps the most striking example is JD Vance, who once called Trump an idiot and allegedly compared him to Hitler, now being his vice president. See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/jd-vance-once-compared-trump-hitler-now-they-are-running-mates-2024-07-15/>

socialist regime. And later, after Fidesz lost the elections in 2002, in my interlocutor's telling, they realized that "good policies are not enough to hold on to power, as power is multi-layered." That is when they started to build their own media conglomerate and economic strongholds, but they also started working on their own conservative philosophy which rejected the idea that the state should be limited. This worked so well, that Fidesz in Hungary became essentially synonymous with the political right, and any attempt at "passing them from the right" in elections has failed ever since their first election in 1998. Fidesz and Orbán, therefore, managed to personalize conservatism and being on the right in Hungary, much earlier than American political figures could since Ronald Reagan.

2.3.3 - Democracy and effectiveness

When I asked him about his political philosophy, Mr. Techera proudly proclaimed that he is a 'national conservative' who closely works with the NatCon Conference and its founder, Yoram Hazony - he is, in fact, the organization's International Programs Coordinator. I asked him what that term 'national conservatism' means to him and he told me that it is about "giv(ing) democracy some control over politics, trying to give the majority of the people, as they express their will through voting, some control over the state." He went on to talk about how the judiciary is rendering the work of elected leaders worldwide impossible, mentioning Marine Le Pen, Sarkozy, and Netanyahu as examples. He advocated for a change in the structure of democratic institutions so that the 'judiciary' cannot block the workings of the executive or the legislative and function as a veto power. He emphasized that "if you're stopping the democratically elected representatives from acting, then you're both blocking the elite system and the popular legitimacy." Which means that, in his mind, this functioning is not only antidemocratic but also makes the system ineffective.

Another, American interlocutor of mine, turned to Fukuyama's notion of vetocracy (Klein, 2016) to explain that if there are too many actors, there is no way to implement sensible

reform. There is always going to be, he continued, representatives, big companies, lawyers, think tanks who would oppose change and therefore, the political elite would lose its ability to govern. He went on:

Thus, part of what Trump is doing, and we're seeing this playing out, is the only way, historically speaking, to tackle this, is to use the power of the state to reduce the number of actors, bring them to heel. If you want to see the crude Russian version, Putin, we have a country in the 1990s, early 2000, run by oligarchs with their own little banking clans, et cetera, et cetera. Putin's coming, saying, "okay, you do what we say now or else we start seizing assets, doing things." Say what you will about Putin, but he brought the country back into control.

A Hungarian interlocutor of mine - a conservative academic who wished to remain anonymous - emphasized that the need for efficiency warrants a different type of politics. "How you separate powers is a question of efficiency," he noted, "this is what Americans are learning from us." His theory for why the new American right is so intimate with Fidesz was that before Orbán, Americans did not know a lot about pragmatic politics and rapid decision-making. His perception is that Americans are traditionally more inclined to make decisions based on values, whereas in Hungary, "this was rooted out after decades of communist rule and scientific socialism." Additionally, he added that the sort of "executive order" governance was introduced by Obama and then revved up by Biden, and Trump is merely making an "overcorrection." He added that learning from one's enemies is an important step to victory. Another Hungarian interlocutor saw this as an especially good thing. For him, conservatism was never about vague ideological convictions, but about interest-based politics. "The left, for

example,” he argued, “has always assumed what the workers needed. The right will ask them and then see if it can deliver based on that knowledge.”

Techera also noted that other structural changes are necessary for more democratic politics, such as “the use of what used to be progressive ideas like referendums.” He kept emphasizing that, while he thinks that a change of elites is indispensable, one also has to push for these structural changes at the same time.

Such sentiments about democracy and the will of the people can be found all over the post-liberal and national conservative scene. This sentiment can be broken down to 2 elements: 1) a narrative advocacy for the use of democratic tools in decision-making, such as referendums or plebiscites, and 2) the preference for strong and effective executive power and a subsequent rejection of the other branches of power, especially the judiciary (Buzogány, Varga, 2019). Adrian Vermeule and Patrick Deneen are two of the most influential figures espousing such views on the post-liberal national conservative right. Vermeule who is a legal scholar known for his “common good constitutionalism” thesis is the most famous popularizer of the idea that the rule of law can be maintained even without the separation of powers (Vermeule, 2023). What is more, in his book co-written with Eric Posner, they argue that “legal fetishism” or the belief that the executive power should primarily be held accountable through the law is obsolete, and that political tools are much better at keeping the executive in check (Vermeule, Posner, 2022). In fact, they argue, the “administrative state” already does most of the governing, as the judiciary and the legislative are much slower and cannot react rapidly and adequately to imminent issues. They propose that rather than being an aberration, this is a structural necessity (Ibid). As for Patrick Deneen, he has been one of the most cited authors among post-liberals and national conservatives since the publication of his book, *Why Liberalism Failed*. In his latest book titled *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, he proposes the concept of “aristopopulism”, with which he advocates for a ruling class who

respond to the needs of the people as opposed to technocrats. Project 2025's unitary executive theory and DOGE's personnel overhaul, firing thousands of civil servants were presumably inspired by these legal and political theories, as both authors are recurring points of reference in the Heritage Foundation's publications. Not negligably for this thesis, both authors are visiting speakers at MCC, and Deneen has even praised Balázs Orbán's books on several occasions.

The question of whether democracy could be improved through plebiscitary tools such as petitions, primaries, referendums, or plebiscites has preoccupied advocates of plebiscitary democracy on the progressive side as well (Hendriks 2018). However, practical analyses of existing governing styles and plebiscitary tools usually paint a different picture, especially when it comes to Hungary. Hendriks proposes 4 types of plebiscitary politics: 'political-leader oriented' versus 'public-issue oriented' and 'inside-out' (top-down) versus 'outside-in' (bottom-up) (2021). Fidesz and Trump campaigns usually fall under Type II in Hendriks' taxonomization, which would be characterized by an 'inside-out' (top-down) logic of mobilization with a "content oriented" or "public issues" focus. Hendriks, for example, categorizes Trump's social media framings, such as "migrant caravans" as a "politically directed social media rally on 'hot topics'" (Ibid). As for Hungary, referendums and 'national consultations' proposed by Fidesz are always preceded by heavy media campaigns in favor of the preferred outcomes and contain leading questions.

Körösenyi et al point out, furthermore, that in the 2012 constitution, "the referendum as a populist tool was weakened in the new constitution and it came to be a purely *plebiscitary* method in the hand of the head of the executive power," (Körösenyi, Illés 2019, 281, original italics) whereas many of the political system's "elitist, non-majoritarian elements - such as the Budgetary Committee and other institutions independent from the government - got, in fact, stronger" (Körösenyi et al 2020, 13).

As for whether plebiscitary leaders get informed by the will of the majority or the other way around, the populism literature has explored through concepts such as “paternalist populism” (Enyedi 2015) or “empty populism” where political mobilization is not based on substance or issues but rather on fearmongering, manipulation, demagoguery (Csigó, Merkovity), and absolutist options. In other words, in this style of representation, it is not the representative that responds to the will of the people, but the constituents respond to the “representative claims” of the representative, in which the representative has disproportionate power over how the claims are formulated and what options are presented²⁰ (Körösenyi, Illés 2024).

Furthermore, while Fidesz’s ideologues, such as Márton Békés, would characterize tools like referendums or “national consultations” to be tools of integration into the nation through mobilizing emotions like anger or feelings of community (Békés, 2022), the questions they present also tend to stir up hate against certain groups of people (refugees, LGBTQ people, liberals, etc.) (Bocskor, 2018), which could hardly be regarded as integrative. Nevertheless, in right-wing discourse these are seen as tools with which the majoritarian will can be represented in an “effective” manner. This is, of course, a narrow view of democracy, where “integration” is highly specified and not offered to every member of the community.²¹

2.3.4 - Charisma

Another important point that Mr. Techera made was that, in his perception, a good leader will be characterized by the fact that they will care about the essence of their nation and the “character of their people” more intensely than others might. This, according to him, requires a certain type of character with a certain type of education.

²⁰ The next chapter will further explore the effects of the crisis narrative and how that narrative seeks to drastically limit the palette of available options that is identified both in the PLD literature and in the populism literature as a defining element of such systems, through the concept of thin constructivism (Kováts 2021, Marsh, 2010).

²¹ The majoritarian view is also easily overlooked. An example is what became famous in Hungary as the slave law, which elicited massive protests that could not achieve substantive results.

Who are the people who love this way of life, who would want to dedicate themselves to fixing it and therefore would undergo the difficulties of politics of any kind of leadership in any kind of community, would undergo the difficulties of education to be fit for this? The difficulties of persuasion and of proving loyalty so that followers follow them. All of those things require therefore, on the basis of a kind of concern with justice that is shared special virtues (sic). Not everybody is going to be a math genius. Not everybody is going to be a great economist. But also not everybody is going to have a good judgment on political events. Not everybody is going to realize which way things are going and how to help out politically by heading off events. Those kinds of people are especially talented and probably their education is not going to be math or economics. It's going to be history and politics. Those again are special virtues that are needed. But the context for them is: do you love your way of life and does anybody trust you with it? Those are demands that we make on ourselves, but also that every people as a democratic assembly has the right to make on their leaders. If it's not possible to say that our leaders love our way of life, then it's no longer possible to say we have self-government or any self-respect. And so it's the end of democracy.

The charismatic leader in the case of Trump and Orbán has two major characteristics: 1) a conceived “closeness” to the people, and 2) a genius knack for leadership and an inherent (divine or at least extraordinary) ability to know what the nation needs.

As for the first: Orbán is famous for using common language with folksy turns of phrases, for emphasizing that he is the first prime minister from the countryside²² (which, in

²² See Orbán's discussion with Alice Weidel, leader of the far-right AfD in Germany: <https://youtu.be/B8pupAUSsUQ?si=ACNXzmCtQb0YEvkQ>

fact, is not true), and for positioning himself as David in a fight against the trending Goliath in his political narrative, which is usually Brussels or some kind of a globalist elite (Orbán-speech, 10. 23. 2024.). Similarities can be found in Trump's political narrative, especially in campaign modes. Gestures implying that he is not alienated from ordinary people included showing up with McDonalds uniform mixing with the workers, or driving a garbage truck in the latest presidential campaign. However, the narrative of an anti-elitist elite (a billionaire and a prime minister of 15 years with a family of millionaires and billionaires posing as anti-elitist) puzzled even my interlocutors. "You can't be an anti-elitist elite," one claimed, "MCC is an institution for elite education." He added that the anti-elitist element can be found in the government's fight against the "Brussels despot." What is significant in the common narrative is that in spite of the fact that Trump's administration is full of billionaires and among his supporters are most of the big Silicon Valley figures, Hungarian pro-government media still thematizes Trump's win as a success for the people, as one of the two heads of the Washington-Brussels dragon was cut off (Orbán, 2025).

The second is a twofold characteristic. First, charisma can just mean "strong" in general, being able to stand up and protect. This narrative is used by both Trump and Orbán in a manner which allows the reinforcement of this narrative of their self-image through praising the other. Orbán himself risked an unusual wager before the US elections, openly supporting Trump and visiting him in the United States in Trump's Mar-a-lago villa, instead of the then-incumbent president, Joe Biden (Michel, 2024) to promulgate an image of Trump as a figure of hope who can bring peace and prosperity once elected. This works the other way around, as well. According to the Center for Fundamental Rights, in the year leading up to the elections, Trump mentioned Orbán a total of 109 times, far more than any other foreign figure, and always in a positive manner. This should be viewed with a grain of salt due to the institution's obvious biases and a lack of a detailed methodology for the study other than it being "a (quantitative

and qualitative) content analysis” (Center for Fundamental Rights), but the results are not at all surprising given Trump’s seemingly unprovoked praising of Orbán at the only presidential debate between Kamala Harris and himself, an event considered to be the highest-stakes political event before elections.

Secondly, this ability comes from the charismatic leader’s conceived understanding of “the essence of the nation”, a quality which, according to acolytes of both Trump and Orbán, creates national cohesion (Békés, 2022), but respective political narratives suggest a more Schmittian understanding of politics by these people: Orbán’s famous speech after Fidesz lost the elections in 2002 included what is now commonly used as a catchphrase: “the nation cannot be in opposition” (Orbán-speech, 2002), which continues to inform Fidesz’s politics. Attacks against civil society organizations as “foreign agents” have been part of Fidesz’s narrative since the beginning with increasing severity of legal and political harassment, including the setting up of a “Sovereignty Protection Office.” When Elon Musk’s “Department of Government Efficiency” cut USAID to foreign institutions in the beginning of 2025, Hungarian pro-government media hailed it as a win for the people that organizations including ones providing social services for homeless people, children, or communities suffering from discrimination were deprived of funds.

All of Trump’s campaigns have included similar tendencies towards the dehumanization of immigrants and demonization of anti-Trump protesters as astroturfed²³ subversive movements from whom the nation must be saved (Neiwert, 2018).

Understanding the “character” or “essence” of the nation, in this sense, is a process of antagonization in the Schmittian sense, which understands politics along the lines of the “us vs

²³ Astroturfing: “the practice of publishing opinions or comments on the internet, in the media, etc. that appear to come from ordinary members of the public but actually come from a particular company or political group, as a way to make it seem that a product, policy, opinion, etc. is very popular or has a lot of public support” (Cambridge Dictionary). The name derives from AstroTurf, a specific company that sells artificial grass. The new meaning refers to the fakeness of alleged grassroots movements.

them” divide, presupposes the “homogeneity” of the nation, and decides the legitimate actors of politics based on that divide (Körösenyi, 2020).

2.3.5 - Knowledge Meets Power - Conclusion

I asked my interlocutors about what they think is to be gained from this relationship for either of the parties, Hungarians and Americans, in terms of governing. Positive sentiments about democratic legitimacy and effectiveness and charismatic leadership characterized the answers, again. As for the US’s advantage, many of them said that there is much to learn from Orbán’s leadership: “we could all use the intelligence, perseverance, and courage of Orbán” and his “dedication to serve his people.” One went as far as to say that Orbán’s influence in terms of his realist approach to politics was akin to the influence of great 20th century architects of the welfare state. He added that “Orbán is one of the most serious leaders in 40 years. A serious Christian Democrat.” My Hungarian interviewees agreed with this. One claimed that Orbán’s realization about how to use different layers of power including the media and other economic pillars can serve as a model for US conservatives to rebuild their, in his mind, lost traditional bases, the church and big capitalists. Another agreed, asserting that the right in the US is so enthusiastic about Hungary, because “everybody wants to copy the Orbánian dream” of seizing and then staying in power. “If a style of power politics is successful, others will want to learn it, too.” Nevertheless, according to him, both parties are to gain from this relationship, as, “although Orbán is a political genius, Trump is a very successful businessman, and we can learn a lot on that front.” He characterized the relationship between Hungarian and American conservatives as being in the stage of “cross fertility,” in which both parties can learn.

Others emphasized that while Orbán is an anticommunist, and now, as communism is making a comeback, in their minds, in the form of the “despotism of the EU”, and his cunning is needed, they also contended that Hungary is a “small country in Europe, and it is tiny in the

world,” therefore, it needs the help of a giant like the United States in its fight against this “despotism”.

All of these necessitate a stronger network, one argued, where knowledge can meet power for a joint fight. He believed that Balázs Orbán managed to lay down the groundwork for such a network through MCC, the Danube, the MKI, the Center for Fundamental Rights, and a strong Hungarian presence at various conservative events, most importantly, the NatCon Conference. He added that Hungarians have already taught a lot to their American friends about power and how to use it.

Chapter 3 - Thin Constructivism a.k.a How Post-Liberals Operationalize Plebiscitarianism

3.1 - Background

The aim of this chapter is to shed light on the discursive frameworks Hungarian and American conservatives share as a way to operationalize or justify the radical approach of plebiscitarianism to governing style. This framework is at the same time a descriptive view about the end of liberalism as a global hegemonic force over international relations and a prescriptive (normative) rejection of a set of values associated with liberalism (or claimed to be associated with it). This rejection is used as a crisis narrative tool, the purpose of which is to justify extraordinary measures and as a new source of legitimation for different (“post-liberal”) governing styles. Additionally, when it comes to US-Hungarian relations, the descriptive power of the end of liberalism is not only a shared tool that Hungarian and US conservatives exploit as a crisis narrative, but also serves the purpose of justifying a close relationship between these two groups, even when the cooperation does not seem geopolitically justified. The Trump administration’s hostility towards the European Union that Hungary is part of, as well as the tariffs the former imposed on the EU that Hungary will be among the biggest material losers of, are narrated as 1) the story of the big brother helping out the smaller one in resisting a despotic and technocratic international institution (of the EU) (G. Fodor, 2024; Orbán, 2025), or 2) as the logical step in preparing for and navigating the future of multilateral international relations after “the liberal world order finally dies”, which is bound to happen, according to my interlocutors as well as the national conservative and post-liberal literature, sooner rather than later (Roa, 2024; Dreher, 2024). Furthermore, as we will see in the following, the crisis narrative is at the same time a call for urgent action as well as a cause to celebrate an achievement, which is a more triumphalist narrative. It is, in fact, not an uncommon trope in

far-right politics to depict an enemy as pathetic and small and menacingly large at the same time (Toscano, 2023).

3.2 - Framework

3.2.1 - Thin Constructivism

I use the concept of *thin constructivism* to analyze the narrative tool of “the end of the liberal world order”. I use this concept in a number of senses.

The first is an ontological and epistemological understanding along the lines of what the literature conventionally means by the concept, relying on Kováts’s work (2022). The claim of thin constructivism, which this paper utilizes, is that the political success of a given discourse depends on material circumstances, but those circumstances leave room for a wide array of interpretations; and that, in turn, the dominant interpretations can to an extent shape the material circumstances. This literature rejects the absolutism of foundationalist (or positivistic) interpretations of the world as well as thick constructivist understandings. On the one hand, *foundationalist* ontology (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) and the positivist and realist epistemological schools deriving from it, claim that there are exogenous facts of reality that are independent from one’s subjective experience (Kováts, 2022, 65-70.)²⁴. *Thick constructivism* or postmodern epistemologies, on the other hand, emphasize the role of discourses and subjective meanings in creating social realities, and some even claim that reality does not exist outside of representations (Bevir, Rhodes, 2021). Thin constructivism, in contrast, rejects the conflictual tension between foundationalist and thick constructivist approaches to understanding reality, and assumes a dialectical relationship between exogenous, measurable phenomena and discourses (Kováts, 2022). This means that not all discourses can achieve hegemonic levels if they do not, one way or another, interact with lived experiences based on

²⁴ Although claims about whether social relations can be measured the same way as natural phenomena differ between different schools that subscribe to foundationalism (Kováts, 2022).

material conditions. Marsh explains it through the case study of globalization as follows: “while any narration of the processes of globalization is possible, the real economic processes associated with globalization will constrain the effectiveness and longevity of that discourse” (Marsh, 2010). While the position of this thesis is that national conservative and post-liberal interpretations of the world are - in the least - incoherent (and, according to the author, inhumane, but that is outside the confines of this thesis), as will be shown in the following, they do point to the inability of liberal interpretations to adequately describe exogenous phenomena and lived experiences.

3.2.2 - The Appeal of Post-Liberalism

This is where this thesis, therefore, joins Körösenyi (2020) and Scheiring (2019) in rejecting the presupposition of the regime-classification literature and the hybrid-regime thesis, in which right-wing populism is seen as a deformity or corrosion of an ideal-typical image of liberal democracies. This thesis’s disagreement with the regime-classification literature lies in the fact that, whereas the latter presupposes an ideal functioning of liberal democracies which could have an equilibrium were it not for populist forces deforming its institutions, this approach acknowledges structural inconsistencies in liberal democratic systems and sees the reactions of far-right “post-liberal national conservatives” as potential, alternative (albeit brutal, or, in many respects, merely discursive) answers to these existing crises of liberal democracies. Following Arrighi and Silver’s (2001) analysis these tendencies can be interpreted as reactions to a crisis of accumulation in financialized neoliberalism, the era that emerged dominantly in the early 1980s after the end of the capital-labor consensus (Mandel, 1985) of the post-war Bretton Woods system, and that was characterized by a massive bottom-up transfer of wealth especially to the financial sector (Harvey, 2005), precarization of the post-industrial working class, and financialized transnational capital’s intrusion into democratic processes (Scheiring, 2020). In the Arrighi-Silver analysis, this is a cyclically recurring

phenomenon, in which the global hegemon shifts its dominant source of wealth from material accumulation to the financial sector, which results in a crisis of accumulation (which, in our case, is the 2008 financial crisis) and the hegemon being dethroned by a power which is still dominant in material accumulation (which appears today in the form of China) (Arrighi, 2010; Arrighi, Silver, 2001; Scheiring, 2020; Gagy, 2019). The rejection of liberalism by “national conservatives” and their “post-liberal” enterprise can be interpreted in this *hegemonic transition* literature, on the one hand, from a political realist’s²⁵ analysis as an “illiberal solution(...) to restore the dominance of capital” (Scheiring, 2020, 5)²⁶ as well as from the perspective of post-liberal national conservatives - on which this thesis focuses critically - as a historic, last-ditch effort to save the hegemon’s - in their mind, the ideal of “the West”, in the broadest understanding - dominance through an attempt (narrative or practical) to revive state power. This thesis’s preoccupation is the latter: theorizing the post-liberal national conservative right’s *justificatory methods* for “illiberal solutions to restore the dominance of capital” (Ibid). But, as we will see, contradictions will arise from 1) the lack of a clear vision of a practical alternative to the crisis of liberalism, and 2), in our case between Hungarian and American post-liberals due to the different geopolitical positions of their countries.²⁷

²⁵ Realist in the sense of political theory and international relations literatures.

²⁶ While this thesis touches that critique, developing an analysis with all the structural factors would necessitate more space than what this thesis allows.

²⁷ Theories by scholars who have dealt with radical right movements in different countries - and especially in Hungary - as forces reacting to the crises of neoliberalism include authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff, Tansel, 2018; Lendvai-Bainton, Szelewa, 2018), ordoliberalism (Geva, 2021), authoritarian nationalism (Scheiring, 2020), etc. Others have proposed more holistic understandings of the situation (including Arrighi and Silver above) such as Gáspár Miklós Tamás via his theory of post-fascism as a state of being in our current era (2000). Tamás explains post-fascism as the revolt of the (white) middle-(and upper-)class - in an era when capital is no longer regulated by the workers’ movement - motivated by the apparent contradiction between the ever expanding freedom of capital and the non-expanding citizenship rights confined by nation-states, in order not to overthrow global capitalism but to establish their authority over who can be deemed worthy of nationality and limiting that circle even more (2000). This thesis does not specifically engage with these arguments not for a lack of agreement, but because I focus here on the broadest possible interpretations behind the motivations of post-liberal national conservatives in the US and Hungary for which the concepts of plebiscitary leader democracy, thin constructivism, and anti-liberalism as an empty signifier provide more dynamism and leave more space for conceptualizing some of the contradictions of this relationship than more specific analyses. (Even though most of these texts theorize important aspects of post-liberal national conservatism, especially the post-fascism thesis, which should be analyzed through the US-Hungarian case in another project.)

Success is provided by the image broadcast by national conservative post-liberal narratives of *constructive subversiveness*. This self-narrative describes these movements as subversive actors, “the sand in the gears, the stick between the spokes, the thorn under the nail” (Orbán-speech, 03. 15. 2024.) who resist “liberal despotism” to create something new. The success of this subversive narrative is shown by the fact that the biggest traditionally “neoconservative”, “classical liberal”, or “fusionist” conservative institutions (educational institutions, think tanks, etc.) have adapted some version of the post-liberal narrative both in Hungary and in the United States.

3.2.3 - Liberalism and Post-Liberalism as Empty Signifiers

However, as the following will prove, it is not clear in the discourse what exactly is meant by the “liberalism” that is being “resisted”, let alone the goals of “post-liberalism”. This conceptual obscurity is the other, more metaphorical sense in which the term thin constructivism is used in this thesis. We do not know what is being constructed, because the meanings of liberalism and its alleged anti-thesis of post-liberalism are *empty signifiers* that keep changing and, therefore, remain dynamic. But that dynamism is part of precisely the logic that was introduced through the concept of plebiscitarianism and plebiscitary leaders rejecting “abstractions” to uphold the “primacy of the political”.

3.3 - Discourses of Post-Liberalism

3.3.1 - Histories of Illiberalization: Hungary

Hungary was the subject of much international attention after Viktor Orbán’s infamous speech in Tusnádfürdő in 2014, following Fidesz’s second two-thirds majority win in the parliamentary elections, in which he introduced his ambitions for building an “illiberal democracy” and for creating an “illiberal” identity. Much of the literature on illiberalism

considers the speech the first serious attempt at appropriating or owning the term by the radical right (Enyedi 2023; Laruelle, 2022; Kauth, King, 2020; Rosenblatt, 2021; etc), a term believed to have been coined by Zakaria (1997).

In that 2014 speech, Orbán introduced some important terms to the audience that still reverberate in political discourse including “*világrendszerváltás*” (world-systems change or world regime-change; a subject of witticisms ever since because of its double meaning: one meaning refers to world-systems theory and implies that we are currently experiencing a multipolar shift in geopolitics, while the second implies an expansion of the regime-change in Hungary in 1989 to a global level insinuating a parallel between the Soviet Union and the “liberal world order” - a common trope in Fidesz’s narrative) and the *illiberal-state* (Orbán-speech, 07. 28. 2014.)

As Buzogány and Varga note, discursive resentments about liberalism and neoliberalism shared by right-wing parties had existed in Hungary long before the start of the second Orbán-administration in 2010 (2019), let alone the 2014 speech in Tusványos. In their account, they rely on sociological field theory to map the evolution of right-wing conservative thought in Hungary, and the ‘interpretive fields’ through which actors in institutions reinterpret and rationalize a change in leadership style through new conceptions of and justifications for control. This corresponds to what one of my Hungarian interlocutors told me: “it is almost a cliché about Hungarian conservatism, but theory is always trying to catch up with practice.” I argue that the more personalized plebsicitary control by Orbán (in the party and over the country) resulted in its rationalization by Fidesz’s intellectuals through a critique of liberalism. Buzogány and Varga also trace Fidesz’s evolution through the ideational foundation of an increasing discontent with liberalism and neoliberalism (2019). After Fidesz’s radical

conservative turn in 1995,²⁸ it started to establish its own ‘knowledge regime’ (Ibid) by infiltrating existing institutions such as Péter Pázmány Catholic University as well as Corvinus University in Budapest, and establishing their own institutions, including Bibó College and the Századvég think tank. Among their main intellectuals were András Láncki, István Stumpf, and Gábor G. Fodor, who largely relied on the ideas of German-American political philosopher, Eric Voegelin, the American sociologist, Leo Strauss, and his teacher, the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt to establish their political philosophy (Ibid). The main elements included the “primacy of the political”, antagonistic understandings of politics, and their proclivity towards a type of “political realism” that rejects the fixity and constraints of rigid institutional structures and abstract ideological tenets (Láncki, 2015; Buzogány, Varga, 2019), all of which were described in the previous chapter; as well as a focus on “natural law thinking”, as one of my interlocutors phrased it, based on various ancient teachings, and its particularistic application on societies, one which rejects the “progress thesis” of both liberalism and communism. Besides this, and especially after the end of the first Orbán-administration in 2002, there was an increasing overture to what the party economists and influencers called “unorthodox economics” (Matolcsy, 2009, 2021) to create a strong paradigm against the then-hegemonic “modernizing consensus” (of fundamentalist neoliberals and more moderate modernizers, who had already been influential in the early 1980s but gained especial momentum after the regime-change [Bohle-Greskovits, 2012; Szalai, 2005]), a paradigm which the literature calls “financial nationalism” (Sebők, 2019; Piroška, 2021). Sebők’s account verifies Buzogány and Varga’s in that a strong identification against the hegemonic neoliberal or modernizing paradigms characterized the new right in Hungary (Varga, Buzogány, 2019; Sebők, 2019).

²⁸ Before that, the party’s self-identification had been ‘national liberal’ since 1993 from which they dropped the ‘liberal’ part in 1995.

3.3.2 - Histories of Illiberalization: Enters the US

These three fundamentals (1. a Weberian-Schmittian understanding of politics, 2. “natural law thinking”, and 3. “unorthodox” economic strategies) constituted the post-liberal intellectual pillars of the party. Many of my interlocutors told me what is also expressed in the right-wing Hungarian literature (Békés, 2022) that the American right is lagging behind the Hungarian right-wing tradition, and that instead of focusing on these three pillars above, they are still preoccupied with their libertarian-individualist tradition. More surprisingly, this is increasingly expressed in the American right-wing literature and was reinforced by many of my interlocutors.

Nevertheless, after the start of the second Orbán-administration, Hungarian political and intellectual right-wing figures opened up towards Anglo-Saxon but mostly American conservatism which manifested in increasing cooperation through organizations whose prioritized - if not main - purpose was to foster dialogue between American and Hungarian conservatives. Such institutions included the Danube Institute, the Center for Fundamental Rights, MCC Feszt, CPAC Hungary, as well as a number of American institutions such as NatCon or the Common Sense Society.

Why was there an opening towards the American right? In the last decades there have been substantial changes in the fight over the primacy of American conservatism. While the *National Review* - which used to be the symbol of hegemonic conservatism in the US ever since William F. Buckley Jr. started the magazine and where he and a number of right-wing publicists cooked up the “fusionism” thesis of conservatism that ended up informing the Reaganite turn in American politics - still publishes articles warning against Orbánism (and especially his commercial relationship with Russia and China), the magazine is far from substantially influencing politics anymore (Savage, 2024²⁹). The most important institutions

²⁹ *National Review*’s irrelevance has been discussed on their own site as well, although it is almost impossible to decipher whether such pieces are satirical or not: Dougherty, 2021.

are either new ones, or old ones that have adapted to an “ideational shift” from fusionism³⁰ to post-liberal national conservatism (Borg, 2024), an observation that my interlocutors shared, as well. This ideational shift which some describe as the “recalibration” of the American right (Ibid) had its social roots in ethnicist and paramilitary right-wing fringe groups since the 1990s mostly in the American South, and, later, in the form of the Tea Party (Neiwert, 2017), and a number of more radical political influencers, talk-show hosts and Fox News anchors (Ganz, 2024; Blumenthal, 2010) until it finally reached intellectual circles, after Donald Trump’s campaign increasingly normalized fringe groups like the alt-right (Neiwert, 2017). One of my interlocutors told me that he had not been particularly interested in political work, until he saw an advertisement of an event organized by the American post-liberal thinker, Gladden Pappin, titled ‘Intellectual Trumpism’. That was the moment he realized that his set of values has reached an institutionalized level with an intellectual flair, which was something new. My interlocutor told me that he has followed Gladden ever since he realized that what I call an ideational shift was going on in conservative intellectual circles, and that is how they ended up in Budapest, which they see as one of the last strongholds of the West.³¹ Borg identifies three large schools in this ideational shift: the Claremonters, the national conservatives, and the post-liberals (2024).³² These branches are genealogically distinct but their philosophies are based on a strong rejection of liberalism and a belief that the state must be reinvigorated so that it can

³⁰ See in chapter 2.1: “Fusionism refers to the intellectual, economic, and political cooperation between different factions of the American right, which started in the 1960s. It primarily describes a strategic, historical cooperation between traditionalist conservatives, evangelicals, and acolytes of the Chicago-school right-wing libertarian movement (whose most notable member is Milton Friedman) and wealthy businessmen. Frank Meyer, writer of the *National Review* is widely regarded to be the intellectual engineer behind this alliance of different factions whose strategic common grounds were anticommunism and laissez faire economics (Stedman Jones, 2014; Tanenhaus 2009; Ganz 2024).”

³¹ See chapter 2.3.1: “Gladden J. Pappin is the co-founder of conservative quarterly journal, *American Affairs* as well as the Substack *Post-Liberal Order* which has editors such as Patrick Deneen or Adrian Vermeule. Pappin moved to Budapest as a visiting fellow at MCC and now is the president and chair of the board at the MKI”, the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, which is a state-owned think tank under the supervision of Balázs Orbán, Viktor Orbán’s political director.

³² He studied the following institutions: the American Enterprise Institute, American Moment, the Brookings Institution, the Cato Institute, the Center for American Progress, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Hudson Institute, the Progressive Policy Institute, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, RAND Corporation and the Stimson Center.

serve national interests better and can instill what they deem “traditional Christian values” into its people (Borg, 2024). This is in strong - and open (Hazony, 2022) - opposition to fusionist republicanism which - in discourse - values constitutional checks and balances and is in favor of laissez faire economics (Stedman Jones, 2012). The post-liberal intellectual hinterland, furthermore, got increasingly stronger when it became clear that the Republican base was more loyal to Donald Trump than the Party.

By then, dozens of prominent leaders of the American intellectual right have been making pilgrimages to Orbán’s Hungary including Rod Dreher, Yoram Hazony, Patrick Deneen, Jordan Peterson, etc, and Steve Bannon’s observation that “Orbán was Trump before Trump” had become a commonplace. Viktor Orbán, Balázs Orbán, as well as a number of Hungarian conservative politicians and pundits are regular guests at post-liberal national conservative conferences such as NatCon³³, the Common Sense Society Conference³⁴, the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship³⁵, etc. and Hungary was the first country outside the US to host a CPAC event.

3.3.3 - Descriptive Statements about the End of Liberalism

Let us turn to some conceptions about the descriptive ‘end of liberalism’ narrative and the prescriptions that follow from it that are commonly shared by post-liberal national conservatives.

The descriptive concept of ‘világrendszerváltás’ has since been theorized and interpreted by the party’s theoreticians and political influencers. Márton Békés, one of Fidesz’s more radical intellectuals often writes about the “death of hegemonic liberalism” which, according to him, has been uncontested since the fall of the Soviet Union (Békés, 2022). Békés

³³ Hungarian speakers have included Viktor Orbán (twice), Balázs Orbán (5 times), Attila Demkó, Balázs Hidvéghi, Ágnes Zsófia Magyar, Enikő Győr, Frank Füredi, Kinga Gál, and Zsófia Tóth-Bíró, comprising the biggest non-Anglo-Saxon faction in the history of the conference.

³⁴ Interestingly, the now seemingly inactive organization had a Hungarian branch, as well: Common Sense Society Hungary.

³⁵ With the notable presence of former President of the Republic of Hungary, Katalin Novák.

and Balázs Orbán give the same list of turning points in their respective writings that, according to them, mark the end of the era of global liberalism, such as 9/11, when the legitimacy of the system was first seriously questioned according to the authors, the 2008 financial crisis, which shook the economic foundations of the system, the “migrant-crisis” which is narrated by Fidesz as a security issue that could only be resolved by certain nation-states instead of international communities, and the Covid pandemic, where, again, according to the authors, state actors overrode the “open border principles” of “liberal democracies” and states assumed additional extraordinary powers (such as lockdowns, price caps, mask and vaccine mandates, etc.) (Békés, 2022; Orbán, 2021). One of my interlocutors reassured these theses and said that he decided to move to Hungary from the US when he realized that liberalism killed the West. Eastern Europe and especially Hungary, however, are the last strongholds of “culture”, he opined. He added that the US might have a chance since “Liberation Day” - a term that is now commonly used by American right-wingers to refer to the day of Trump’s second inauguration. Another expressed that he also came to Hungary because he got uninterested in DC politics and Hungary had something to offer him, although he might go back soon, as “glorious things await” now in the US since “Liberation Day.” In all of the contexts “Liberation Day” came up, it referred to some sort of last chance for “the West” to prevent its total collapse. One of my interviewees claimed that Western Europe has already collapsed under liberalism, but the US still has a chance with the help of countries like Hungary.

Furthermore, while there are occasional mentions of “neoliberalism” by both authors (Békés and Orbán) - as well as speeches such as Balázs Orbán’s at NatCon 4 in Washington, DC titled “Preventing Another Era of Neoliberal Foreign Policy” (Orbán, 2024) - suggesting a political-economic critique, these issues are not looked at through the lens of a systemic critique of global capitalism, in which the issues listed above as turning points marking the end of liberalism are analyzed as the results of the contradictions of capital (Harvey, 2005), such as

imperialism on the periphery, crises of accumulation, or unequal redistribution. Instead, the authors point to a “global elite” of institutions or individuals who, through deliberate vice or incompetence create or exaggerate security issues by weakening their own capacity to act (Orbán 2022, NatCon Brussels, “National Sovereignty vs. Empire and International Government”), push a “woke agenda” (Orbán 2022, NatCon 3, “The EU is a Woke Leviathan”) or even a “neomarxist agenda” (Hidvéghi 2022, NatCon, “The Corruption of Liberal Democracy”), maliciously speculate on financial markets (Békés, 2020), etc. The “turning point events” that the authors enumerate, therefore, are separate, “cornerstone” issues which are glued together by the comprehensive narrative (Körösényi et al, 2020) of the end times of liberalism.³⁶ In that sense, these concepts are flexible or dynamic which all sorts of societal harms can be projected on. In other words, in the descriptive narrative about the end of liberalism, “liberalism” is an *empty signifier*.

As for the American literature: all three of the branches of the American new right that Borg identifies as the post-liberals, the national conservatives, and the Claremonters have produced literature contending that liberalism has failed one way or another. While these three are not easily separable as there is plenty of overlap (Deneen is a regular speaker at the National Conservatism conference, and many Claremonters are signatories of NatCon’s statement of principle), I followed these delineations and looked at the most important programmatic books by these groups. Borg identifies Patrick Deneen and his ideas expressed in his book titled, *Why Liberalism Failed?* as the center of post-liberal thinking, but the group also includes Adrian Vermeule (see chapter 2) and Gladen Pappin, for instance (who is now president of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, or MKI, see chapter 2). Deneen decries

³⁶ The historical source of these problems, in Balázs Orbán’s account, is the field of ‘transitology’ which forced the “doctrines of liberal democracy” on Eastern European nations. The “end times of liberalism” or “transitology” do not have exact definitions in these works and the readers only learn about a number of their negative effects such as the breaking up of communities, limiting nations’ self-determination, causing spiritual dismay, etc. (Orbán, 2021)

liberalism's failures which he sees as paradoxically the result of its own success: excessive individualism and political pluralism at the expense of the core values of nations as well as of the cohesion of local communities (Deneen, 2018). This is, in his account, perpetrated by a corrupted unelected wealthy elite that claims to be value-neutral but at the same time is authoritarian in its form of rule, and, as Deneen argues, both the political left and right are complicit in this (Ibid). As for national conservatives, Yoram Hazony, the most prominent figure of NatCon proposes something similar: individualism is destroying "the West" and it has destroyed the Republican establishment. It resulted in growing inequality, endless wars, and disintegrating communities (Hazony, 2022). Christopher Caldwell, a distinguished "Claremonter", a contributing editor of the more high-brow Claremont Review of Books, went as far as to say that Reaganism and Reaganomics³⁷ is just the other side of what he sees as the destructive and individualistic liberal coin of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s (Caldwell, 2020). All of their writings situate their work as part of a fight against the historical enemy of liberalism that is destroying "the West".

The relationship between capitalism and liberalism, however - despite the strong criticisms of individualism -, is a more contested territory. There was no-one among my interlocutors who believed that capitalism is bad altogether, however: one interlocutor of mine argued that capitalism is necessary for the production of the "washing machine, the iPhone, laptops, etc. but once these wants are satisfied, it tends to colonize human relationships". The "colonization of human relationships" includes the algorithm of dating apps, which do not have an incentive to foster long-lasting relationships, because then they would lose their users, and therefore, they encourage "one-night stands". A similar instance, he argued, is OnlyFans, which is the "monetization of sexual relationships". He went on to argue that in that sense, he agrees with the Marxist critique of liberalism. Not too much, he added, as he is writing a book about

³⁷ A radical set of laissez faire economic policies associated with Ronald Reagan.

how “liberalism and Marxism or communism are the same thing”. Post-liberals should, in his advice, reject the ideological thinking of both liberalism and communism. This cautiousness and odd specificity characterized all of my interlocutors who ventured to the area of mild criticism of capitalism.

Another argued that economic decentralization, in fact, leads to private centralization of resources at the expense of the state. The state, he argued, should not be anticapitalist, but it should take back a significant amount of power to fight against private monopolies, but especially against those who disregard the core values of a nation. Critique, this way, was always context-dependent and never systemic, another feature allowing for dynamism in post-liberal thinking.

The other thread that was common was a denial of links between capitalism and liberalism. This thread was, again, not nation-specific as there were both Hungarians and Americans who shared it. They claimed that liberalism, in fact, curbs the functioning of capitalism, as its institutions are getting bureaucratized, which they see as the source of their “decadence”. They are no longer represented by statesmen who see it as their duty to maintain the conditions necessary for the uninhibited functioning of capitalism. “Decadence” and “excessive wokeism” were common denominators in explaining this critique of liberalism.

My interviews highlighted the contradictory set of critiques about liberalism which coexist within the movement: on the one hand, a light anticapitalist critique and, on the other, a “liberalism is a curb to capitalism” one. Despite these fundamental differences in approach, national conservative and post-liberal identities are seldom questioned and there is a sense of unity for a common goal. Great excitement is shared among post-liberal national conservatives about a new future that became imaginable since “Liberation Day” in the fight against liberalism which is perceived to be destroying “the West” despite a lack of a systemic and coherent analysis of the problems.

3.3.4 - Prescriptions for Post-Liberalism

‘Illiberalism’ and *‘post-liberalism’*, on the other hand, are prescriptive terms for how national conservatives or post-liberals should think about their projects. Although the term “illiberal democracy” had been softened after the 2014 speech to ‘Christian democracy’ in official political communication, since the second election of Donald J. Trump, “illiberal democracy” has again been taken out of the drawer (Orbán, 2025). Both terms have apologists from the US including Michael Knowles who defended them in Esztergom at MCC Feszt and Rod Dreher, publicist of the Danube Institute (Knowles, 2023; Dreher, 2023).

Some of the arguments have already been discussed, such as a call for charismatic leaders who are directly in touch with the people instead of institutions and abstractions. Some elements include a strong ethnicism and pro-white middle-class natalism. One of the limitations of this paper is that these latter elements are not elaborated on. It is partly because there is good existing literature on this, and partly because rightist politics had engaged in racism and ethnicist family policies already before the paradigm shift from fusionism to post-liberal national conservatism that this thesis focuses on.

As for questions about neoliberal economic policy, there are a number of different views in Hungarian and American post-liberal discourses, as well as in terms of prescriptions for one’s own country and the other. There is a school - the one which approaches post-liberalism from the basis of a right-wing capitalism critique - that advocates for economic isolationism, who even go as far as promoting autarky (Békés, 2022). This current is especially strong on the American side, especially since apology for Trump’s tariffs is in high demand. The other current (one which seems to be stronger in Hungary) is one that believes in the ‘liberalism corrupts capitalism’ thesis, advocates for free markets, but without ‘mediators’, meaning transnational institutions.

Contradictions, however, characterize both. While tariffs are the headlines of the day and do mark a significant paradigm shift, Trump continues to give out the biggest tax cuts for

the rich (and also general tax cuts) and is working on downsizing the administrative state with Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency. These are quite significant continuations of traditionally neoliberal policies.³⁸ The same can be said about Hungary's political strategy. While there are some measures that could be taxonomized as statist, such as strengthened government control over the national bank, extra profit taxes on banks, or greater government control over "strategic sectors", or neoconservative such as pro-natalist tax exemptions, a considerable number of decisions are in continuity with the neoliberal tradition: the flat rate tax system, the strategy to attract foreign direct investment via worsened labor conditions, low corporate taxes, and low wages, and strong anti-unionism do not challenge conventional neoliberal politics (Körösényi, 2020).

The few voices arguing for autarky (the Schmittian concept of political self-sufficiency in a world which is divided to grand regions, each dominated by a world-power) such as Márton Békés's (Békés, 2022) were dismissed by my Hungarian interlocutors as philosophical "loose cannons" and his ideas by my American interlocutors as such: "Hungarian autarky is poverty." Some went on to argue that Hungary is a "small, open country" (an expression the popularity of which reached its peak at the time of the post-regime change "modernizing" wave [Sebők, 2019]) one that one would not expect from post-liberal commentators), which cannot afford to isolate. Almost without exception, my interlocutors told me that while it makes sense that the United States can afford to isolate itself with its myriad of resources and vastness of land already being surrounded by oceans, resourceless and small Hungary cannot.

³⁸ In this context, I am not referring to the historical framework of transnational institutions, including the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO, but rather working with a more abstract idea of "neoliberalization" following David Harvey's rough definition: "neoliberalism is [...] a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2007, 2).

When I pushed further about other supply-side neoliberal policies such as what is referred to as the slave-law in Hungary, or Trump's massive tax cuts for the rich, the answer was simple from both my American and Hungarian interviewees: conservatism is the most non-ideological ideology, in fact, it is anti-ideological, which means that they do not believe in universalizing grand theories, but rather in the conservation of local, particularistic "wisdom". That is why "conservatives from Britain look really different from conservatives from Texas, who look really different from conservatives from Borsod." They do not subscribe to grand worldviews that tell them how they should approach every issue, they say, but rather rely on a sort of political realism. Some of them qualified this political realism with 'natural law thinking', which, they explained, is inherent in everyone, as we can innately know the difference between good and bad, before we start rationalizing things. Political realism, again, is the dynamic essence, the "quasi-ideology" (Körösenyi, 2020) that informs the loose compass of post-liberal public policy.

3.3.5 - Rejection of Liberalism as Political Realism

Post-liberalism, one American interviewer explained, therefore means following this inner drive for good while resisting the manipulation of the ready-made formulas of ideologies. He used the example of "the village thing" in Hungary to illustrate his point. By "the village thing" he meant the government's recent measure to distribute 1 billion HUF (in dollar) to pubs in villages with a population lower than 1,000 people. The government's aim is to reinvigorate these settlements economically and also culturally, as "the pub is the soul of the village", as Márton Nagy, the Minister of the National Economy put it. The program has received a lot of flak ranging from it being pointless to it being downright harmful in a country where 500 thousand people suffer from severe alcoholism (Nagy, 2025). My interlocutor was quite frustrated with a specific criticism about the program merely being a "giveaway to voters". "It can be a giveaway," he explained, "and a policy at the same time. That's called politics." He

argued that the point of the giveaway is not that it is a giveaway but that it serves a good purpose. “And like, we all kind of know village life is good. Like, it's nice to live in a village. Like, I don't live in the city. I hate cities.”³⁹ He argued that spending money on villages is not the most economically efficient thing that a government can do with its money, but Orbán does it anyway, because he understands what natural law thinking is and how politics work. Liberal critics, he said, are only doing pseudo-politics. “Real politics is like getting a constituent group and trying to balance the interests of constituency groups while making society better.” That is what Orbán is really good at, he argued. Seeing what is good and achieving it through understanding non-ideological politics.

He went as far to claim that Orbán’s significance is on par with that of Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish economist, “the most significant architect of the welfare state, who had enormous impact on social democracy around the world.” That is Orbán’s significance to American conservatives, as well, he explained. Slovakia, Russia, China are also doing some kind of post-liberal politics, but none of them have the intellectual depth Hungary has, he contended. Others argued that what China or Russia are doing is too aggressive and controversial and agreed that conservatives from the US go to Hungary as they grow “intellectually and philosophically.” Rod Dreher, the most famous American correspondent of the Danube Institute describes in his article titled, *Budapest, City of Conservatives*, that “[i]n a 2019 meeting with visiting conservative speakers in Budapest, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán concluded by saying he hoped that we would all consider Budapest our intellectual home.” Dreher promptly responds in his article: “Hungary and its capital are becoming synonymous with intellectual conservatism.” Dreher describes a Hungary where conservative American expatriates are “envied” by their peers at home for their opportunity to be there - particularly since ex-Fox News star-reporter, Tucker Carlson went to Hungary to interview Viktor Orbán. That was when everything

³⁹ He lives in one of the most expensive agglomerations around Budapest.

changed, according to Dreher. He describes Hungarians telling them that since Carlson started to popularize the country, non-Hungarians were no longer looking at them with suspicion, but with curiosity and delight. Dreher goes on the claim that some sort of intellectual movement started to form during the first Trump-presidency, but “they have not yet found focus or relevance in the real world.” “Enter Hungary,” he continued, “a country where conservatives in power are unafraid to use that power to press for their convictions—beyond what most American conservatives would be willing to do.” He ends on this note: “Thanks to visionary conservative political leadership and the favourable attention of an American media star, the intellectual right in the West is discovering that all roads lead to Budapest” (Dreher, 2023).

While Dreher has been paid by the Hungarian government to produce articles that depict the country’s politics positively, and some of my interlocutors are also being paid directly or indirectly by trust-funds close to the government, there is an observable tendency of more and more American conservatives making their pilgrimage to Hungary. After the election of Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán gave a speech declaring that “[w]e were the West’s black sheep. Now it turns out we are the future.” The prime minister referred to what Donald Trump called himself and Orbán in their first phone call after Trump’s first election. The gains, therefore, can be seen as this: while American “non-establishment” conservatives can point to the example of Hungary as a way to normalize their more radical, antagonistic, and “realist-pragmatic” approach to politics, whereas Orbán can position himself as “the future”, the charismatic leader who can lead the way in the crisis of liberalism, thus strengthening his legitimacy for charismatic leadership.

3.4 - Conclusion

I started this chapter by introducing the framework of thin constructivism. I used it in two senses. One referred to a dialectical relationship with observable reality and the impact of

its interpretations to that reality (Kováts, 2022; Marsh, 2010). I argued that the success of post-liberal discourses, in spite of their incoherence and use of empty signifiers, lies in the fact that the rejection of a previously hegemonic discourse, which can be associated with liberalism, resonates with people - for now.⁴⁰ The other sense in which I used the term was to refer to the obscurity of what is being constructed by the post-liberal project. I pointed out that both the descriptive and prescriptive meanings of the term ‘post-liberalism’ by the new right function at least as a set of contradictory ideas and, at most as empty signifiers. On the one hand, all sorts of crises are blamed on liberalism without a comprehensive, structural explanation other than “liberal elites are decadent and incapable.” Critiques of capitalism, when they do appear, also lack structural explanations and pragmatic consequences. On the other hand, prescriptions about what a “post-liberal” world should look like are unclear, contradictory, or lack nuance.

What results is a sort of dynamism that I discussed in the previous chapter to characterize plebiscitary regimes. The sort of “political realism” or “pragmatism” that is promoted by post-liberals in the US and especially in Hungary leave extraordinary room for leading politicians to act, where they are unconstrained not only by institutions, but also by “abstract principles”, which makes this kind of politics almost impossible to hold accountable. In other words, just like the governing style (Körösényi, 2020), the ideological framework with which it is operationalized (Buzogány, Varga, 2019) is dynamic, flexible, and easily adaptable to change, too.

While Arrighi and Silver’s analysis of a hegemonic transition (2001) may not be internalized in its entirety by the post-liberal national conservatives, we do see a version of that narrative in the form of end-of-liberalism narratives to justify more manual control over politics and the economy as heroic attempts to “save the West” from decaying liberalism. In chapter 2

⁴⁰ We can see today that at least in Hungary the right-wing post-liberal discourse finally seems to be losing its momentum.

and 3, I interpreted the post-liberal national conservative right's justificatory methods of "illiberal solutions to restore the domination of capital" (Scheiring, 2020) and new, personalized and dynamic approaches to rule and democracy through the concepts of plebiscitary leader democracy and the thin constructivism of end-of-liberalism narratives.

This "realist" approach to post-liberalism, furthermore, is what American conservatives find increasingly attractive in Hungarian politics. Additionally, Hungary is a small enough country, which means they can comfortably promote its intellectual and political achievements without getting entangled in power politics, which would not be the case were they promoting Russian or Chinese "post-liberalism." Hungary, in that sense, is a more convenient example through which radical right-wing politics can be normalized in the US.

Orbán's gain, on the other hand, is that leading intellectuals of a world power help him pose as a charismatic leader, solidifying his role as a "protector of his people."

Are there other, practical benefits of this relationship beyond discursive normalization and political positioning? Can such a dynamic ideological framework provide a basis for concrete action plans? In the next chapter, I will explore the concept of "connectivity" celebrated by Hungarian and American conservatives by combining the analytical frameworks plebiscitary leadership and post-liberal thin constructivism.

Chapter 4 - Plebiscitarianism as International Relations? What Theories of Connectivity Tell Us About Post-Liberals' Conceptions of the Political?

4.1 - Hungarian National Conservatives and Connectivity

4.1.1 - Connectivity as Plebiscitary Leadership on the International Level

In the case of Hungary, the dominant approach to international trade (from the ones discussed in the previous chapter) seems to be the one which is suspicious of transnational institutions responsible for facilitating trade among nations, but not of free trade itself. This is showcased by the most recent book by Viktor Orbán's Political Director, Balázs Orbán (no relation), titled *Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity*, which is on sale at most major conservative events organized by Hungarian institutions, such as MCC Feszt, or American ones where Hungarians are invited, including NatCon (which has the Hungarian Danube Institute among its sponsors) and CPAC Hungary. In the book, Balázs Orbán lays out a number of his arguments about his theory of connectivity, which he defines as a strategy to navigate “complex interdependence” (Keohane, Nye, 2011) in a globalized world, which, he adds, “determines the operation of the international system in the sense that states strive to establish it, but it also influences their behavior” (Orbán, 2024).

Balázs Orbán believes that the aim of the strategy of connectivity is to get the most benefits out of economic interdependence between nations while minimizing the risks of those dependencies. Secondly, he acknowledges the existing risks of interdependence, but argues that the answer is not de-connecting and isolating, but to develop resilience. How is resilience developed? Not through “institutionalized and mechanistic processes”, but through “a decision-maker - for ‘enhanced leadership’ - [who can] override automatic processes when the need arises” (Orbán, 2024, 165-180). To do this, he goes on, one needs “stable political leadership”, “help from economic actors in implementing the strategy (autonomous external actors)”, and

“internationally relevant and connected institutions that help decision-making (institutes, universities, think tanks, etc.)” (Ibid). This line of thinking is underlined by Fidesz’s economic strategy which - besides nationalizing companies in what are deemed strategic sectors such as energy, banking, and construction (which are often reprivatized to loyalist entrepreneurs allowing for massive capital accumulation [Sebők, 2019]) - is, to a large extent, based on attracting foreign direct investment, a strategy referred to by the government as “strategic partnerships” largely in auto- and battery manufacturing. Answering to critics about exposing the country’s economy to such an extent to foreign (mostly German and Chinese) capital, Márton Nagy, Minister of the National Economy simply responded once as: “Capital has no ideology.”⁴¹ This corresponds well to the “economic neutrality thesis” which the government proposed as part of their 2024 “national consultation”⁴² about the “new economic policy” in order to justify trading with all the great global powers.⁴³ This seems superfluous, as the government had already been engaging with building economic relations with Russia and China for more than a decade.

Balázs Orbán backs up his argument about the utility of free trade managed by a strong decision-maker by describing a Hungary which can use its geographic location and cultural connections as a mediator between East and West to its advantage. He calls Hungary a “keystone state”, a term which was coined by Nikolas K. Gvosdev, Russian American scholar of international relations (2015), but was first used to describe Hungary by one of my American national conservative interlocutors, Carlos Roa (2022). Roa came to Hungary to report on the 2022 parliamentary elections, when he realized that “Budapest has a potential to act as a

⁴¹ See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msxPXztW07k&t=75s> last opened 05.28.2025.

⁴² Another plebiscitary tool which falls into the category of Hendriks’s Type II of plebiscitary politics: a “public issue oriented”, “inside-out” (top-down) type (Hendriks, 2018). “Although national consultations are similar to referendums, they lack formal legal regulation, transparency, and controllability, and their outcomes place no obligations on the government. This is a plebiscitary tool that Orbán can freely apply and may arbitrarily use to legitimize his politics and public policy” (Körösenyi, Patkós, 2019).

⁴³ Eastern capital is just as good as Western capital (Márton Nagy).

mediator between Washington, Brussels, and Moscow” (Ibid). Balázs Orbán liked this idea so much, in Roa’s telling, that he wanted to title his second book *Keystone State* instead of *Hussar Cut*. While it did not end up as the title, the cover still depicts an archway, the keystone of which has the Hungarian blazon carved into it.

I suggest conceptualizing theories of connectivity by the Hungarian national conservative political elite as an application of the most important elements of the plebiscitary leader democracy framework to the international level. Connectivity, in this framework, is the post-liberal justification for charismatic leaders to follow their own dynamic foreign policy uninhibited by institutions and bureaucracy for the assumed benefit of their respective nations. The source of what plebiscitary leaders tend to understand as their blank mandate (Körösenyi et al, 2020) - that allows for flexibility in decision-making, instead of following campaign promises - comes from the supposed closeness of the leader to their people, which, in this case, is an intimate preoccupation of the prime minister with Hungary’s Western and Eastern cultural ties, which makes the country a “keystone state”. Whenever plebiscitary tools are utilized, they usually take the form of “inside-out” (top-down) (Hendriks, 2018) initiatives in matters that have already been decided and which have been polled favorably in public opinion polls.

4.1.2 - Connectivity as an Alternative for after the Collapse of Liberalism

Another important argument that Balázs Orbán makes for connectivity, or, for charismatic leaders (or “enhanced leadership”) to be able to dynamically shape their countries’ own networks is “strategic flexibility” or the “room for maneuver” especially in times of imminent crises such as the end of liberalism, terms which had been described by Balázs Orbán in his previous book, *The Hungarian Way of Strategy*. In that book, he describes how Hungarian history has been characterized by great powers limiting Hungary’s room for maneuver in terms of political strategy including the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, Nazi Germany, or Soviet Russia (Orbán, 2021). Today, according to Balázs Orbán, the threat that

limits Hungarian sovereignty and its room for strategizing is the European Union, or the “bureaucrats from Brussels” (Balázs Orbán | National Sovereignty vs. Empire and International Government | NatCon Brussels), as it wants to prevent nation states from trading with Russia or China. However, he argued, the crises of liberalism⁴⁴ open up prospects for global multipolarity, a system that will replace the liberal world order, which widens Hungary’s options and room for strategic maneuvering and, consequently, its options to determine its own connections, but it is still a goal that Hungary will need to fight for.

This celebrated multipolarity, in Fidesz’s narrative, is, besides the supposed internal and external crises, being brought about by the joint forces of Hungarian and American national conservatives. In this narrative, the “Soros-empire” is a “two-headed dragon”, and since one head in Washington has been slayed by Trump, so now the remaining head is in “pliers” between America and Eastern Europe (Orbán, 01. 24. 2025.). In his 2025 commencement speech, Orbán, referring to the election of Trump, declared that now:

[w]e are now on the main street of history, while our opponents are wandering the muddy back streets of the outskirts. I looked at the pictures of our European allies at the Paris meeting. It was as if they had bitten into something sour. The European Union is outraged that the negotiations have started without them, and they want to sit at the table. Sándor Demján⁴⁵ said to me: ‘If you want to sit at the table where the big boys are playing, look around and find the loser. If you don't find it, know that it's you.’ So much for Paris (Orbán-speech, 02.22. 2025.).

⁴⁴ See chapter 3.

⁴⁵ One of the most influential businessmen in Hungary during his lifetime. For the purposes of this thesis, he is irrelevant.

Orbán emphasized that Hungarians were “the pioneers, the heralds and the initiators of this rebellion”, and that “President Trump is not our saviour, but our comrade-in-arms” (Ibid).

The right-wing literature and narrative, therefore, operationalizes its promotion of charismatic leadership and political dynamism over institutions and abstractions in terms of a normative rejection of a “tyrannical” liberalism. This normative rejection takes action in the form of a post-liberal national conservative alliance between the US and Hungary. In this case, the signifier ‘liberalism’ is not entirely devoid of content, as it refers to “mechanized decision-making”, but the concept of connectivity does not specify what the ways are in which liberal institutions such as the EU are limiting Hungary’s capacity to act or its building its own networks through “enhanced decision-making”. The signifier is therefore empty (or *thinly* defined), as the terms “woke leviathan”, “EU bureaucrats”, or “Empire and international government” do not provide explanations for the puzzle above. As for what it constructs is thin, as well, as it does not propose principles along which trade between nations should be conducted but precisely a dynamism of decision-making that is not barred by them and purely relies on a thinly defined interest-based sovereignism.

4.2 - American National Conservatives on Connectivity

What do American post-liberals say about the fact that politicians and political influencers are using a narrative about an alliance between Hungarian and American post-liberals to justify the Hungarian government’s network-building project which includes the US’s biggest competitors, Russia and China? Some arguments in favor of Hungary’s pursuit of FDIs have already been mentioned such as: “Hungarian autarky is poverty”. Others explained that conservatism is not ideological in the sense that it is “particularistic”, it means different things in different places, or that it is based on the interests of a given people and not

on an abstract set of principles. All of my interlocutors agreed that Hungary cannot afford to do what the United States is doing in terms of international economic policy, and that it has to trade with whoever will bring jobs and resources. Carlos Roa explained it like this:

Let's say if China comes along, says 'we want to put in \$20 billion into your economy', Americans will say, 'well, why are you doing this? It's Chinese money.' Hungarians can say 'well you know what, we agree with you, we prefer American money. We really actually do. But will you put \$20 billion into our economy? Well, you know, money is tight these days. So this is the issue.' So the Hungarian government puts in the view of 'look, we'd rather be Western aligned. We really would prefer it. We need to be practical and realistic given the needs of our citizens, our economy and so on and so forth. That means being more open, engaging with the East.

The fact that American national conservative intellectuals had an apologetic stance towards Hungarian trading with the US's competitor countries led me to my next question about Trump's tariffs and how those would affect US-Hungarian relations. After his inauguration, Trump and his cabinet started to delineate a detailed plan for how US-imposed tariffs on imports from different nations - the most important issue Trump campaigned with - would work in real life.⁴⁶ Currently, Trump is threatening the EU with 50% tariffs on most of its goods.⁴⁷ The US makes up the biggest export market for cars manufactured by German

⁴⁶ The driving principle of the tariffs was to impose them on nations in a way that would more or less correspond to the balance of payments between the tariffed country and the US.

⁴⁷ Although, at the time of reading, the percentage might have changed since. In April 2025, Trump announced a 20% tariff on most European goods, a starting point for negotiations (which many of his followers on social media called a bluff, which is part of his "art-of-the-deal" strategy). He later dropped it to 10%, but on May 23rd, he threatened to raise it to 50%, which could go into effect on June 1st. On the 25th of June, he postponed it to July 9th (Hagan, BBC.com, 2025).

companies. Hungary would be very badly affected by the tariffs, being one of the biggest sites of manufacturing for the German automotive industry. I asked my interlocutors: how, in their minds, in spite of Trump's hostility towards the EU, is this relationship between Orbán and Trump still fruitful?

This elicited different points of view. Most of my Hungarian interlocutors referred back to the "no uniting ideology" thesis of conservatism, arguing that it will always be particularistic, fit to a specific nation's interests instead of fulfilling some universal idea. One of my interviewees told me that that is precisely the reason why it is so difficult to build an alliance of conservative nations: everyone acts according to their own national self-interest. "This is a fight" he added, "and we know it, but we are still together. It is much better if the US is close to us in terms of their worldview than if it would be a problem on that front, too."

As for the Americans, the answer usually included a two-part argument: first, they engaged in justifying the tariffs as such: the US can no longer afford to be the world's policeman without a price, to "pay for everyone indirectly via supply of security". Georgia, Ukraine, Taiwan, the Middle East are going to fall, some of them explained. The liberal world order is collapsing, they told me, and "the only way forward is to collapse it on our own terms." This means "downsizing [the US's] sphere of influence" and focusing on "what is more reasonably manageable". "At the same time," one continued, "we're telling our allies, okay, you need to pay more while we pull back, even though yourselves have no more money to pay for this stuff". The second part of the argument goes like this: Hungary needs to focus on its own connections including this relationship, because the EU is going to collapse anyway, and good relationships as well as good deals with the US will ensure Hungary's future. This idea, according to Viktor Orbán, is shared by Trump himself who, in Orbán's telling, regularly suggests to Orbán that he should leave the EU, to which Orbán's alleged answer is: "85 percent

of our products are sold within the EU, so it would not be worth it. Perhaps if there was some kind of counter offer...” (Kávai, Sarkadi, 2025).

Americans, in other words, are encouraging Hungary to accelerate the perceived deterioration of liberal institutions by leaving the EU and pursuing their own international connections, while maintaining a focus on their relationship with the US.

4.3 - Conclusion

To sum up, Hungarians tend to either look at the unfolding situation of Trump’s imposition of tariffs as an unfortunate element of an otherwise conducive relationship or as an opportunity to create new, advantageous frameworks for cooperation unconstrained by mediating institutions, where the “decision-maker” - the charismatic leader - can navigate the interests of their nation in a more dynamic world which allows for the maintenance of their capacity to act and react more rapidly. The political and intellectual elite call this framework their “theory of connectivity”. Americans, on the other hand see this as the acceleration of an otherwise collapsing framework of global politics, which necessitates a more intense relationship for Hungary with the US for after the inevitable fall of the European Union. This crisis narrative is, at the same time, an opportunity for the charismatic leader to show off his extraordinary abilities and a reason for a constant campaign burst mode.

The foreign policy of populist leaders, including Viktor Orbán and others, have been characterized by the literature as either inconsistent (Freeden, 2017), politicizing diplomatic relationships (Jenne, Visnovitz, 2021), or as de-Europeanizing (Müller, Gazsi, 2023). While I do not contest these claims, I suggest looking at it through the framework of plebiscitarianism practiced on an elevated international level. I aimed to demonstrate this through analyzing the discourse of the proponents of two plebiscitary leaders, Orbán and Trump, about their relationship. I argue, furthermore, that the end-of-liberalism discourse normalizes the dynamic and top-down governing style of plebiscitarianism at the expense of checks and balances and

proceduralism. This is also enhanced by these leaders' positioning of each other as the charismatic leaders with an extraordinary ability to recognize the needs of their people and protect them in times of crisis. This positioning is contrasted with slow and "mechanistic" decision-making processes of the EU. I also pointed out that the diverging interests between these countries that are observable through the cases of Trump's tariffs negatively impacting Hungary and Hungary's trading with the US's competitors are not to be conceived as inconsistencies of their ideology, as that ideology is more broadly defined: dynamic pursuits of the national self-interest. Furthermore, the end-of-liberalism discourse helps smooth out some of these emerging contradicting interests through pointing to an obscure future in which the relationship might end up being mutually beneficial.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

5.1 - Summary

In the course of this thesis, I shed light on some of the most important aspects where the now hegemonic post-liberal national conservatives differ from previously hegemonic forms of conservatism (which I identified as fusionist neoconservatism), and located the relationship between the United States and Hungary as a locomotive for the paradigm shift. I identified two crucial changes with regards to governing style and ideology, and how this combination affects the two countries' international self-positioning.

While some of the arguments of this thesis have been discussed individually in literatures of populism, discourse analysis, regime-classification, or world-systems analysis, such as illiberal crisis narratives or plebiscitarianism in different countries, this thesis aimed at illuminating Hungarian conservatism's impact on the intellectual evolution of US conservatism (and, to a lesser degree, vice versa) which I identified as a shift from fusionist neoconservatism to post-liberal national conservatism. I did this through sociological field theory and focused on the historical and intellectual environments within which this evolution took place.

I identified an approach to governing style that I described here as plebsitary leader democracy as the main shift from fusionist neoconservatism to post-liberal national conservatism in the United States and Hungary's impact on this shift. I described how Hungary is viewed by US intellectuals as a "laboratory" for innovative right-wing governing styles. I explained that plebiscitarisms' dynamism, its pivot to "political realism", a rejection of "abstract principles" in favor of the "capacity to act", and its reliance on charisma as a source of legitimation and charismatic figures for leadership as something where Hungary is viewed to be "ahead of the US" by both US and Hungarian conservative thinkers. Furthermore, I aimed to show in this chapter, how the relationship is used by Orbán to have himself positioned as a

global level ‘statesman’ through American postliberal thinkers and influencers to elevate his charismatic image to the international level.

In the third chapter, I explained how the crisis of liberalism is used as a justification for the shifts in the approach towards governing style. I explored how the fact that descriptive and prescriptive approaches to liberalism are flexible (in other words, the way they function as empty signifiers) fit well with the larger “quasi-ideology” of plebiscitarianism and its dynamic approach to politics instead of a static one (Körösenyi et al, 2020). I looked at how such sentiments originated in Hungary and the US respectively and how they converged and evolved at NatCon, CPAC Hungary, MCC Feszt and other joint conferences. Furthermore, I showed in this chapter how postliberal narratives and national conservative policies are normalized by American intellectuals who pilgrimage to Hungary.

In the last chapter, I aimed to point out some of the diverging conclusions these countries have drawn from these joint standpoints and how the prospects of continued amicable relationships are explored and navigated by the intellectuals of the moment, in spite of diverging geopolitical interests and policies. I found that, besides an emphasis on the particularism of conservative nationalism, a strong emphasis on a need for strong leaders to step in to make their own deals instead of bureaucratic institutions is a must in the era of the decline of the liberal world order. In other words, the narrative tool of the crisis of liberalism is used to justify the elevation of the governing style of plebiscitary leadership on the international level through bypassing international institutions and their procedures in conducting deals with other leaders. This is seen as charismatic leaders with extraordinary abilities and with full support of their people mandated to search out connections and pick their nations’ own interdependencies. Thus, Trump’s tariffs on the political entity that Hungary is a part of is not seen as a contradiction to amicable US-Hungarian relations, as Fidesz is urging more flexible regulations and legal frameworks within the EU, which is an institution that is

understood to be on the verge of collapse, anyway. This is how the dynamism of the governing style of plebiscitary leader democracies and the narrative of the collapse of liberalism and its institutions function in our case as cohesive tools for an international nationalist alliance with divergent interests.

The overall aim of this thesis was to demonstrate through the US-Hungarian post-liberal national conservative relationship and their intellectual evolution how new types of political and economic capital accumulation as well as a push for more personalized and dynamic rule are justified through the quasi-ideology of post-liberalism. This quasi-ideology strongly rejects any sorts of constraint on power that could slow down dynamic decision-making by strong individuals in times of perceived (or alleged) crises. I used Arrighi and Silver's hegemonic transition thesis to give a broader context for the post-liberals' national conservatives radical shift from the fusionist consensus and their enterprise to "save the West".

5.2 - Limitations

The time available for the writing of a master's thesis, the length-constraints of such a thesis, and the author's spatial limitations allowed only for interviews from a limited number of interlocutors from a limited number of Hungarian and American organizations. It would be worthwhile to continue these qualitative analyses with a more defined focus on the way institutions promoting the US-Hungarian post-liberal alliance recruit members and reproduce their views.

Important commonalities between Hungarian and US national conservatives and post-liberals such as an overt focus on ethnicism and pro-white middle class redistribution were outside the scope of this thesis, as well. There are really good investigations about racial antagonization in populist politics (Partizán, 2025; Bonansinga, Forrest, 2025; Traverso, 2019), and larger conceptualizations of this tendency including the theory of post-fascism (Tamás,

2000; Toscano, 2023), but it would be worthwhile to look at the ways the Hungarian ethnicist far right normalizes ethnicist discourses and practices elsewhere, and how to fight back.

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