



Zsófia Mária Schmidt

# HUNGARY'S SYSTEM OF NATIONAL COOPERATION

*Strategies of Framing in Pro-Governmental Media  
and Public Discourse, 2010–18*

With a foreword by Andreas Schmidt-Schweizer

*ibidem*

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Verlag



## **Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: ID 213222981 © István Csák | Dreamstime.com

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-1983-7

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-7983-1

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Hannover • Stuttgart 2026

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## Foreword

On 30 March 1988, a liberal, grassroots, secular, anti-authoritarian and anti-etatist protest movement against the communist regime was founded by students in Budapest under the name Fidesz (Federation of Young Democrats). At the time, no one could have imagined the position of power that this organization, in which the young, rhetorically talented and power-conscious law graduate Viktor Orbán quickly seized the leadership role, would acquire in Hungary in the following decades. Nor was it possible to foresee the radical ideological, political-programmatic and structural changes that Fidesz would undergo during this period. After the organization had represented classical liberal ideals in the first years of the 1990s, party leader Orbán initiated a shift to the right in the middle of the decade. Fidesz, which had entered parliament as a small opposition force in 1990 and had also constituted itself as a political party in the meantime, successfully occupied the bourgeois center and entered an alliance with the churches. In July 1998, the party surprisingly became the leading force in a Christian-national, conservative coalition government; Orbán became Hungarian prime minister at the age of 35. In the following 12 years, the party's turn to the right continued, particularly when Fidesz lost the 2002 and 2006 elections to its socialist and liberal rivals. At the time, nationalist and populist traits were already becoming increasingly apparent in Fidesz's communication. The party came out with Eurosceptic slogans ("there is life outside the EU too"), fundamentally questioned the political legitimacy of left-wing and liberal parties ("traitors to true Hungarianism"), emphasized the primacy of the Hungarian nation, which extends far beyond national borders, and propagated the glorified ideal of a "Christian Hungarian family". At the same time, the right-wing fringe of Fidesz attracted attention with a series of anti-Semitic references. During these years, Viktor Orbán cemented his authoritarian leadership position and the hierarchical structures within the party and ousted all potential competitors. With the overwhelming election victory of Fidesz (and its satellite party, the Christian Democratic People's Party) in April

2010, which gave the Orbán party a two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time, it was now in a position to reshape Hungary's political system and its constitutional order according to its principles. The establishment of the System of National Cooperation (SNC) within the framework of an "illiberal state"<sup>1</sup> thus began and could be consistently continued due to the renewed, extraordinarily clear Fidesz election victories in 2014, 2018 and 2022.

In the course of Hungary's radical transformation into a centralist-authoritarian political system with an ethnocentric-nationalist ideology and an economic order characterized by massive (party) state intervention (including corruption), the discourse strategies and populist narratives of the Orbán regime, which has been able to take over extensive control of the Hungarian media single-mindedly, have played and continue to play a key role. From the very beginning, the SNC's communication (propaganda) provided ideological support for the government's policies and served to "convince" the population, thus playing a special role in securing the power of Viktor Orbán and his (state) party to this day.

This dissertation, therefore, addresses a topic that is of central importance for understanding the political developments in Hungary over the past two and a half decades, as well as the functioning and power practices of an illiberal state order or "defective democracy". In her study, Zsófia Mária Schmidt discusses in detail the main domestic, socio-political, and economic development lines and characteristics of Orbán's "illiberal democracy" and the SNC and sets out the extremely fluctuating results of this policy for the years 2010 to 2018. It is based on the available secondary literature, many official statistics (Hungarian Central Statistical Office/KSH) and government sources, as well as the results of independent opinion research (Institute for Social Research/TÁRKI). Conversely, against this background, it presents the organizational and ownership structures and developments in the Fidesz Media World (take-over, centralization, management, and control) and analyses the

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1 In his speech on July 29, 2014, Orbán spoke exclusively of an "illiberal state", the inherently contradictory term "illiberal democracy" was only used by him later, and with a synonymous meaning. A clear separation of these terms would certainly promote scientific understanding.

strategies, channels, methods and results of the Orbán regime's communication. It draws on two qualitative methods, namely qualitative content analysis and framing analysis, the content and aims of which are discussed in detail. In addition to several key government documents, the framing analysis evaluates three central media outlets (Magyar Idők, Figyelő and Origo) and their websites that propagate the policies of the SNC. The author draws on a total of six hundred articles from the three newspapers mentioned for her analysis of the Orbán regime's framing strategy.

Zsófia Mária Schmidt's dissertation focuses on the presentation and analysis of four communicative frames from the Fidesz government years 2010 to 2018. These frames, which are omnipresent, characterized by certain metaphors, symbols and keywords, and often overlap, are at the center of the ideology of the SNC and its narratives. First, there is the "Frame of Fear" with the central threat scenarios of "migration" and "Brussels", which attack the Hungarian nation and its values, although these threats remain extremely vague and abstract; second, the "Frame of Sovereignty", with which Hungary's independence from external powers ("Brussels" and "Soros"<sup>2</sup>) is invoked against the recurring backdrop of the historical experience of defeat (Mohács 1526, Trianon 1920 and the 1956 revolution); third, the "Frame of Economic Success", (FES) which propagates the success of the "independent" economic policy of the SNC (Széchenyi programs, etc.) after a phase of economic decline; and fourth, the "Frame of Values", which focuses on the Christian family with tradition and nation as absolute values.

The particular merit of Schmidt's work is, first, that the author embeds the analysis in a discussion of the concept of "illiberal democracy" developed by Fareed Zaharia and of constructivism or discursive political theory, and it is not limited to the usual descriptive account of Hungary's political system and its media world. Second, in contrast to most works that deal with the 'Orbán system' or

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2 György (George) Soros, born in Budapest in 1930, is an American investor and philanthropist whose foundation grants also benefited Viktor Orbán at the end of the 1980s. Since 2010, Orbán has made a special media effort to portray Soros as a kind of "public enemy number one" who wants to destabilize Hungary with countless refugees.

the media in “illiberal Hungary”, she takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining the results of her research with those of media studies, political science, and economics. As a result, the research findings gain significant analytical acuity and clarity. It is particularly noteworthy that Zsófia Mária Schmidt is the first to identify the outstanding master frames and narratives of the SNC for the period from 2010 to 2018, thus presenting a fundamental aspect of the illiberal state and the Orbán regime's methods of rule. In doing so, she also demonstrates the outstanding importance of political communication, particularly in an “illiberal democracy”. The results of her research can thus profitably inform further academic studies and future portrayals of the Orbán era and analyses of the character of defective democracies.

Even if the analysis of the four discursive master frames in this study is limited to the years from 2010 to 2018, it is also evident at present (2024/2025) that these frames still dominate the narratives of Orbán's communication. Under the changing domestic and international circumstances, however, their accents are shifting, and new elements are being incorporated into the existing frames. The media instrumentalization of the Russian war of aggression and terror against Ukraine by the Orbán regime is particularly striking in this regard. Hungarian government propaganda immediately made use of this case. It exploits the widespread fear among the population, which the war has triggered in the neighboring country also inhabited by Hungarians, as well as concerns about problems with the energy supply, and relies on a pronounced peace propaganda accompanied by a “peace mission” by Orbán (visiting Putin). The frame of fear and the Frame of Values were thus given new elements (“war” and “peace”). In addition, this narrative could also be incorporated into the frame of sovereignty, namely as an independent Budapest initiative vis-à-vis the “Brussels war supporters”, whose policy also threatened the Hungarian energy supply.

The communication of the SNC, which has dominated the Hungarian media and public discourse over the past decade and a half, has contributed decisively to the repeated overwhelming electoral successes of Fidesz and thus opened up the possibility for the Orbán regime to dismantle Hungary's pluralist-democratic, power-

sharing order and its institutions in the name of “illiberal democracy”. Under Viktor Orbán, a “new kind of democracy” has by no means emerged in Hungary, but rather a retrograde centralist-authoritarian political order that is controlled by a small circle under the absolute leadership of the party leader. (Looking back on the “revolution” or political system change of 1989, one could even speak of a “counter-revolution” or “counter-transformation” by the Orbán regime). The decisive difference to the Horthy or Kádár era, however, is that there is still the possibility of voting out the Orbán regime in elections (albeit manipulated by the media). Moreover, in this respect, an opportunity is currently emerging for the first time. As the results of independent opinion research also show, the everyday experiences of the Hungarian population are increasingly at odds with the narratives of the SNC, which is accompanied by a significant loss of efficiency in the government's communication strategy. (The author also refers to the beginning of such a development in her outlook). Against the backdrop of problematic economic development (loss of purchasing power and inflation, declining economic performance and competitiveness, neglect of the middle class, investment deficits, etc.) and the social impact of openly practiced patronage and corruption in leading government circles, which manifests itself in a striking difference between rich and poor, communication in the FES is losing more and more of its persuasive power.

The frame of values is being damaged in particular by pedophilia scandals, in which the churches are also involved, and the paradigm of the ‘holy Christian family’ and the ‘exclusive marriage of man and woman’ is being devalued by scandals in Fidesz's homosexual clientele. Despite new waves of anti-Brussels propaganda and the emphasis on the ‘Hungarian struggle for freedom’ against the European Union and the ‘Western democracies’, the propaganda regarding the frame of sovereignty is losing its persuasive power as the population is becoming increasingly aware that turning away from the union would be accompanied by serious disadvantages (possible loss of job opportunities in EU states) and growing dependence on other powers, especially China.

Communication regarding the frame of fear is impaired by the unsuccessfulness of Orbán's peace mission to Russia and Hungary's insignificance in global politics. Finally, a particular problem for the SNC and its communication is the fact that a new political force emerged in Hungary in the spring of 2024, which is making fundamental criticism of the Orbán government in its public appearances and the increasingly important new media. In particular, it denounces the rampant corruption, the situation of the opposition media, the catastrophic situation in the healthcare system and the confrontational approach toward the European Union.

After the Orbán regime succeeded in maintaining its power for a decade and a half by means of the narrative master frames convincingly presented by Zsófia Mária Schmidt, the communication of the new movement, the Freedom and Respect Party (Tisza Party) under the Fidesz renegade Péter Magyar, is currently picking up on some obvious contradictions between Orbán's government propaganda and Hungarian reality. This movement, which defines itself as national conservative according to the political mainstream in Hungary, could thus succeed in putting an end to the Orbán era and the SNC. Whether this would be enough to turn Hungary away from the path of 'illiberal democracy', bring about a pluralistic media policy and establish government narratives compatible with democracy is by no means certain against the backdrop of decades of poisoned political culture in Hungary and the global trend toward authoritarian political forces and their promises. The conclusions of this dissertation can help to examine the extent to which Hungary will move away from the ideology and practice of 'illiberal democracy' in the future.

Andreas Schmidt-Schweizer  
Munich, 27 January 2025

*This publication was made possible with the generous financial support of the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe (GCE HSG) and the Department for East European Studies at the University of St. Gallen.*



# Contents

Foreword by <i>Andreas Schmidt-Schweizer</i> .....	1
List of Tables .....	15
List of Abbreviations .....	17
Abstract .....	19
1 Introduction .....	21
1.1 Liberalism vs. Illiberalism: Hungary After 1990 .....	24
1.2 Primary Sources: Statistics, Surveys and Media .....	28
1.3 Secondary Sources: Mapping the Hungarian Political System .....	30
1.4 Research Gap .....	34
2 Politics and Media in Hungary .....	39
2.1 The NER: A New Political Concept for Hungary .....	39
2.1.1 The Basic Law of 2011 .....	57
2.1.2 Social Policy (2010–2018) .....	62
2.1.3 Economic Policy (2010–2018) .....	71
2.2 The Fidesz Media World .....	78
2.2.1 Media in Hungary (1990–2018) .....	78
2.2.2 Ownership Structures of Media Holdings and Advertisement Companies .....	95
2.2.3 Spin Doctors in Hungary: 2010–2018 .....	96
2.3 Channels of Distribution .....	102
2.3.1. Official Government Communication .....	103
2.3.2 Strategy Papers and Key Documents .....	103
2.3.3 Pro-Governmental Online Media .....	104

3	Theory and Methodology .....	107
3.1	Constructivism and Discursive Political Theory .....	107
3.2	Methodology: Qualitative Content Analysis and Framing .....	108
3.2.1	Qualitative Content Analysis.....	109
3.2.2	Framing Analysis .....	114
3.2.3	Qualitative Framing Analysis.....	122
4	Framing Strategies of the Fidesz-KDNP Government (2010–2018) .....	125
4.1	Frame of Fear .....	129
4.1.1	The Frame of Fear in Pro-governmental Media .....	132
4.1.2	The Frame of Fear in Governmental Communication .....	134
4.2	Frame of Sovereignty .....	140
4.3	Frame of Economic Success .....	146
4.4	Frame of Values.....	154
5	Conclusion .....	171
5.1	Outlook: Post-2018 Hungary Viktor Orbán Until 2030? .....	175
6	Bibliography .....	181

# List of Tables

Table 1: Hungarian Online Media and Affiliation, © (Zs. Schmidt, 2018).....	93
Table 2: Channels of Distribution and Data Corpus, © (Zs. Schmidt, 2022).....	102
Table 3: Coding families and themes, © (Zsófia Schmidt, 2021). ....	127
Table 4: Overview of codes used for the predefined four master Frames, © (Zsófia Schmidt, 2021). ....	127
Table 5: Codes and Frequencies, © (Zsófia Schmidt, 2023).....	132
Table 6: Frequency and Codes, Frame of Sovereignty, © (Zsófia Schmidt, 2022). ....	144
Table 7: Codes and Frequency, Frame of Economic Success, © (Zsófia Schmidt, 2022). ....	153
Table 8: Codes and frequencies, Frame of Values, © (Zsófia Schmidt, 2022). ....	169



## List of Abbreviations

CEE	Central Eastern Europe
CEU	Central European University
DK	Demokrátikus Koalíció (Democratic Coalition)
ECB	European Central Bank European Union
EU	Eötvös Lóránd Tudományos Egyetem (Eötvös Lóránd University, Budapest, and Northern Hungary)
ELTE	International Monetary Fund
FES	Frame of Economic Success
FB HU	Facebook Hungary
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISSP	International Social Survey Program ( <i>Nemzetközi Társadalmi Felmérés Program</i> )
KDNP	Keresztény Demokrata Néppárt (Christian Democratic People's Party)
KESMA	Közép-Európai-Sajtó-és Média Alapítvány (Central European Press and Media Foundation)
KINCS	Kopp Mária Intézet a Népesedésért és a Családokért (Kopp Maria Center for Demography and Family, a literal translation of abbreviation: treasure)
KSH	Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (Central Statistical Office)
LMP	Lehet Más a Politika ("Politics Can Be Different" / Hungarian Green Party)
MGFI	Magyar Gazdaságfejlesztő Intézet (Hungarian Economic Development Institute), since 2016
MNB	Magyar Nemzeti Bank (The Hungarian National Bank)
MSZP	Magyar Szocialista Párt (The Hungarian Socialist Party)
MSZMP	Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt (The Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party)

MTA	Magyar Tudományos Akadémia (Hungarian Academy of Sciences)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NER	Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszer (The System of National Cooperation)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NK	Növekedés Kutató (Growth Research Institute)
OECD	International Economic Organization
Párbeszéd	Párbeszéd Magyarorszáért (Dialogue for Hungary / green liberal party)
PL	Poland
PM	Prime Minister
QUAL	Qualitative
QUAN	Quantitative
SKT (1-3)	Széchenyi terv (plans) (1-3)
SZKT (1-3)	Széll Kálmán Terv (plans) (1-3)
SZDSZ	Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége (The Alliance of Free Democrats)
SNC	System of National Cooperation
WB	The World Bank

# Abstract

Since the first landslide victory of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in 2010, numerous institutional reforms have been introduced in Hungary aimed at implementing the *System of National Cooperation* (NER) based on illiberal Christian democracy<sup>3</sup>. Over the past years, Orbán's populist rhetoric and policies have received widespread criticism around the world, evoking headlines such as "Hungary's Authoritarian Descent" (Marton, 2014). Nevertheless, the Fidesz party and Orbán remain popular in Hungary. In 2018, Fidesz formed, in a symbolic coalition with the Christian-Conservative KDNP, its fourth government. The government maintains its success with its new political system, the NER, its policies, and discursive strategies, which are embedded in the context of the "Sovereign Hungarian Nation". Partisan journalism and kinship-based media structures have also enabled the party's success while reinforcing the implementation and presentation of the NER in daily discourse.

This book analyses the concept of the SNC, which was introduced as a form of "New Social Contract" (Csanádi et al., p. 5), and its framing in pro-governmental media. The research examines four narrative frames applied by Fidesz by means of a framing analysis: the FES, the frame of values, the frame of sovereignty and the frame of fear. Essentially, the qualitative discourse analysis shows how Fidesz (mis)uses government-friendly media to popularize its policies and actions. Overall, the NER and its discursive manifestation in the media remain neglected topics in international academia. Therefore, this interdisciplinary, qualitative study elaborates on the complexity of the Hungarian SNC and provides an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing frames in pro-governmental media.

**Keywords:** Fidesz; Illiberal Christian democracy; System of National Cooperation; Framing analysis; Qualitative research

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3 (Lamour, 2022, p. 17)