

Youth Extremism in Hungary: Relevant Issues and Trends¹

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Abstract

Around the globe, young people appear to be interested in and joining extremist groups – from violent jihadist movements to militant left-wing groups.³ Despite the political fragmentation that appears to be a global phenomenon, in many countries, these groups have remained fringe groups. This is not the case in Hungary. Here, the government itself has stimulated extremism. The ruling party, Fidesz, has created an illiberal state, and many young Hungarians seem to favor illiberal or other undemocratic governmental structures over democratic alternatives. This paper seeks to highlight some recent changes in the perception of young people by analyzing shifts in issue perception and importance among young extremist acolytes in Hungary. Particular attention has been paid to the issues of migration, the Trianon trauma narrative, anti-Semitism, trans-people and women's rights. Some of the changes in perception have occurred in association with massive governmental propaganda efforts, which influence the interest of and civic engagement among young extremist acolytes. The paper emphasizes that extremist youth's focus has been adjusting to new political and global topics, such as the American trope of 'woke-ness' and issues surrounding trans-people. However, much of the ongoing discourse has remained firmly anchored in the peculiar regional and national Hungarian circumstances. Social media has interlinked many geographically distant groups and allowed for an avid exchange of ideas between youth globally. Some issues, such as immigration, are universally opposed by right-wing extremists; however, the underlying reasons differ greatly and are influenced by the national political discourse. Other topics that might be seen as extremely relevant by U.S.-based youth extremists, e.g., identity issues, such as homosexuality and women's rights, are understood differently by Hungarian right-wing youth. However, even among Hungarian youth on the political right, there is diversity among cohorts whose political ideologies and life experiences are nuanced and based on a number of structural and political developments.

Key Words:

Hungary, Fidesz, extremism, youth, immigration

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³ Defining extremism, Lipset and Raab (1970: 4) noted the following: "in terms of specific issues, extremism mostly means the tendency to go to the poles of the ideological scale". Given the focus of this paper, I use extremist and extremism here interchangeably with radical right, extreme right and ultra-nationalism, and base 'extremist' on the individual's self-definition.

1 Introduction

Throughout the world, we are experiencing a political shift toward the populist extreme right (e.g., Rodrik, 2021; Goodhart, 2017; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Mudde, 2014). For the first time in one hundred years, the popularity of autocratic regimes outweighs the public approval for democracies (Freedom House, 2022; Müller, 2022). How did we get here? The standard explanation for this trend is that older, less educated people belonging to (ethnic) majorities, often feel overwhelmed by the speed and direction of changes that have occurred during their lifetimes in their countries (Norris, 2020). In addition, young people are frequently depicted as being the drivers of progressive change, often seen as key figures in popular movements for same-sex marriage, legal equality for transgender and LGBTQ individuals, the legalization of marijuana, abortion rights, and so forth. This might be true for a considerable cohort of young people who are actively involved in groups like Black Lives Matter and the Iranian #MahsaAmini movement. Young people are on the forefront of many radical identity and ecological movements. However, explaining the current political climate with a generational divide remains too simplistic and one-dimensional. Many young people have been alienated and turned away from liberal politics and progressive causes and ideologies. Throughout the previous decades, survey-based studies have shown that the majority of young people are indifferent about, or suspicious of, politics. Internationally, young people have been less concerned, less interested, and less involved, and are more apathetic and cynical than previous generations (Seippel & Strandbu, 2016). However, in the authoritarian country, Hungary, research has revealed that alongside a passive majority, various youth cohorts have been politically mobilized at both ends of the ideological spectrum (Szabó & Oross, 2012). This mobilization was especially successful for the extreme right. Research dating back to the mid-2000s has shown the steady flow of the young electorate toward the far right (Krekó et al., 2011). Instead of remaining apathetic, it seemed a new generation of young people began to embrace autocratic and extreme right-wing ideologies in Hungary. Researchers have pointed out that youth are more likely than adults to support far-right-wing parties, and recent studies such as Feischmidt (2020b) have shown the most powerful explanatory factor of sympathy for the far right is age. In other words, generational differences affect far-right sympathy to a much greater degree than social or economic status or level of education. Studying far-right affinity of young Hungarians allows us to analyze how much of this rising trend of youth extremism is a reaction to unfulfilled economic expectations and young people's consequent basic rejection of liberalism and its so-called "woke causes" and how much of this trend is determined by cultural and social drivers and psychological proclivity.

2 Methodology

This mixed methods paper is based on survey data (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022), a literature review, participatory observation at a number of right wing rallies in Budapest between September and December of 2022 (e.g. National Day on October 23 and All Saints March on November 1), and a number of in-depth, open-ended interviews conducted with researchers of the radical right, including Margit Feischmidt, Máté Kiss, Balázs Majtényi, Zsolt Körtvélyesi, and Istvan Grajczar. I also conducted a content analysis of the webpages of two extremist groups with strong youth cohorts Mi Hazánk and Identitás Generáció. In addition, I spoke extensively with one extremist young acolyte. In this study, I am focusing on what Kathleen Blee (2007) calls the 'internalist perspective', attempting

to decipher individual motivations that prompt young social actors to side with extreme-right political movements.

2.1 Hungarian Youth – The Data

The most recent study of the attitudes of young Hungarians is part of the 2022 cross-national Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Youth Study (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022) which focuses on seven countries, including the Visegrád four (V4) – The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary – and the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.⁴ The following focuses on the Hungarian survey results. Some of the more striking results of this survey discussed in the paper include: Young Hungarians are less interested in politics, and their political participation “lags far behind that of their peers in the other V4 countries” (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 68). A majority of respondents (56%) believe that one needs good contacts with the government to succeed in Hungary. According to one-third of young Hungarians (33%), Fidesz can only be removed from power by force. Only one in five young people think that elections are free and fair (22%), reliable information is available to the public (19 %) and the system of checks and balances works (18%) (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 6). The study’s data indicates that actual political participation and intention to participate among Hungarian 15–29-year-olds lags far behind that of their peers in the other V4 countries.

To be sure, geography matters. Budapest is the liberal capital of Hungary. In the 2022 parliamentary election, the opposition coalition ‘United for Hungary’ defeated Fidesz by 7 percentage points (40.78% to 47.78%) (“2022 Hungarian Parliamentary Election”, 2022). However, the newly-formed far-right Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland) received 4.11% of the votes and the satirical Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog party received 5.19% of the votes in Budapest. While remaining the liberal capital of the country, roughly 10% of the Budapest vote went to radical right-wing parties, and one of them, Mi Hazánk, received six seats in the parliament (Tait & Garamvolgyi, 2022). This exemplifies the divided nature of the electorate and some of the deep contradictions the country holds, which are also apparent among young people.

While some of the issues that are important for Hungary’s right-wing youth can be classified as international, and driven by the global community, such as questions surrounding misogyny and transgender acceptance, others are very much created by the political system. Key features of the public discourse surrounding migration and the so-called ‘Trianon Trauma’ have been created domestically in order to foster a very specific ethnic and ultra-nationalist understanding of the Hungarian nation.

⁴ The study was conducted during the spring and summer of 2021 in seven countries simultaneously with the support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022). The sample of 1,500 Hungarian respondents was drawn from the Ipsos Online Access Panel. It was quota-sampled according to age, gender and region in order to achieve a sample that reflects the target population. Of the interviewees, 23% are between 15 and 18 years old, 39% are between 19 and 24, and 38% are between 25 and 29. These central socio-demographics had been pre-defined so the respondents could be targeted directly via email because the quantitative part of the study was conducted online. Data was collected between 10 June and 20 July 2021. The qualitative fieldwork consisted of 10 in-depth interviews and 3 focus groups and took place between 12 April and 22 April 2021.

3 Fidesz and Hungary's Anti-migration Stance

Young extremists' stance on immigration and the fate of migrants and refugees in Hungary has been strongly influenced by the political anti-migrant campaigns that Fidesz organized between 2015 and 2018.

Overall, Hungary's anti-immigrant stance is widely known. The relevance of the anti-immigration topic in Hungarian public opinion is well documented (for example, Barna & Koltai, 2019; Bocskor, 2018; Goździak, 2019; Thorleifsson, 2017). Historically, however, Hungary was not more xenophobic than other Central European nations. Indeed, until fall of 2014, immigration was not a pertinent political issue for Hungarians. In the Autumn 2014 Eurobarometer, a mere 3% of respondents mentioned immigration as one of the two most important issues facing Hungary. At that time, overall, Hungarians were less likely (18%) than the average EU citizen (24%) to believe that immigration was an important issue facing the European Union (Eurobarometer 2014, 83-89, as cited in Bíró-Nagy, 2022).⁵ However, once Fidesz started its anti-immigration campaign in the spring of 2015, the issue exploded in the Hungarian domestic agenda. The perception that immigration was an important issue peaked in Hungary at 68% – ten points higher than in the average of the EU 28 – in the fall of 2015. Overall, in Europe the worry about migration dropped markedly in the following months – although it still remained a widespread concern – as the migration pressure itself eased up. In Hungary, however, the anxiety about this issue declined far less significantly. As Andras Bíró-Nagy shows, in October 2016 – more than one year after the massive influx of migrants and refugees into Europe ended – still 68% of the Hungarian population believed that immigration was among the country's top two concerns (2022: 416).

Thus, the prevalence of anti-immigration sentiments in Hungary's public is certainly linked to the three year long anti-migration campaign by Fidesz. Since 2015, refugees and migrants, and those (e.g., NGOs, EU, George Soros) who the government claims have helped them and brought them to Europe, have become perceived as the main enemies of Hungary (Bíró-Nagy, 2022: 409). In reality, the migration 'crisis' was a god-send for Fidesz, who, due to corruption and mismanagement, had begun to lose popularity and lost seats in municipal elections in 2014 and 2015. Once the Fidesz government launched its anti-migration campaign, the tide quickly began to turn.⁶

In addition to the fierce anti-immigration campaign, the government reacted to the 'migration crisis' with the building of a 325-mile fence along its border with Serbia to keep asylum-seekers out of the country, making unauthorized entry across the fence grounds for immediate prosecution and deportation, ordering a referendum on the EU's migrant quota mechanism, adopting new laws that made it practically impossible for anyone to legally claim a refugee status in Hungary and hampering the work of NGOs that deal with

⁵ Original question: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?" (Eurobarometer 2014, 82-89, cited in Bíró-Nagy, 2022).

⁶ A good example for the anti-migrant campaign is this video that János Lázár – Minister of the Prime Minister's Office from 2012 to 2018 – posted on his Facebook page in March of 2018, spouting xenophobic descriptions of Vienna's 10th district: <https://budapestbeacon.com/janos-lazars-xenophobic-video-provokes-outrage-in-austria-and-germany/>.

migration. Since the start of the Fidesz anti-migration campaign, the migration issue has remained the most salient topic in Hungarian politics.

Fidesz's actions successfully manipulated public opinion to reach xenophobic heights never seen before. As shown above, migration, while it was a marginal issue prior to 2015, began to be seen as one of the two most urgent key problems for the Hungarian public in 2016. Indeed, Europe experienced a substantial influx of 1.3 million refugees and migrants in 2015, about 170.000 of whom travelled along the Western Balkan route through Greece, Serbia and Hungary (Birbaum & Witte, 2015). Most transited into Western Europe and the number of accepted asylees who actually stayed in Hungary was in the hundreds. Notwithstanding that only a very small number of refugees applied for asylum in Hungary, Fidesz managed to focus the public attention on immigration by instigating a continuous anti-immigration campaign that lasted until the 2018 election (Bíró-Nagy, 2022).

Fidesz appropriated key elements of this campaign (and other populist ideas) from Jobbik, the other Hungarian radical right party. Jobbik initially appeared to have been much more creative regarding selecting ultra-right wing popular issues: for example, it was Jobbik who raised the idea of building a physical wall on Hungary's southern border, and Jobbik campaigned already in 2015 on the idea of holding a quota referendum in response to the EU's controversial plan to relocate migrants. However, Fidesz successfully expropriated these ideas. The quota referendum was held on October 2, 2016, and a staggering majority (98.36% or 3,362.224 votes) opposed the EU proposal to send refugees to Hungary. However, the turnout of 43% fell short of the required 50% for the result to be valid (MacDowall, 2016). Nevertheless, the result, while invalid, was still celebrated by Fidesz as a major win. It also strongly indicated that Fidesz's campaigns had politicized a very large minority of Hungarians, including substantial cohorts of youths.

With a number of their fear campaigns, Victor Orbán and his government successfully boosted the public's rejection of immigration in the following years. In a 2017 campaign entitled 'Let's stop Brussels!', Fidesz attacked the European Union and the politicians who were presumably less opposed to immigration (Cerulus, 2017). In 2018, a campaign against the so-called 'Soros Plan' was launched, which the Hungarian government claimed was a plan by the Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros to settle millions of migrants from Africa and the Middle-East in Hungary (Solomon, 2017; Euronews, 2021). Public attitudes against accepting refugees and migrants became aligned even closer with Fidesz's staunch rejection of any and all immigration (Krekó et al., 2019). These campaigns followed the 2015 state-sponsored disinformation campaign that was based on billboards strategically placed all over Hungary featuring images that played on both economic and cultural fears of the public with respect to migration. The main messages were the following: 'If you come to Hungary, you need to respect our culture!', 'If you come to Hungary, you cannot take the jobs of Hungarians!', 'If you come to Hungary, you need to follow our laws!' (Nagy, 2016). These billboard messages clearly indicated that their real aim was not to warn immigrants but to shape the Hungarian public's thinking about this issue (Bíró-Nagy, 2022).

The campaigns intensified and built upon fear and pre-existing feelings of xenophobia. However, –considering the quite significant governmental efforts through campaigns, public speeches, and anti-immigration legislation – for example, the 'Stop Soros' law, passed in 2018, that criminalizes giving aid to asylum seekers and undocumented

migrants – one would assume that hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees were either seeking asylum in Hungary after entering the country through the Western Balkan route or were supposed to be relocated to Hungary through the EU migration relocation scheme. This was not the case. Hungary accepted 145 and 155 individual refugees in 2015 and 2016 respectively⁷ and was supposed to accept 1.294 migrants through the EU migrant relocation scheme (Goździak, 2019). Despite these minuscule numbers, Fidesz's anti-immigrants' campaigns were exceedingly successful.

Today, largely due to these campaigns, a majority (63%) of young Hungarians state that they are anti-immigration (Biró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 65 & 47) and 30% express feelings of Islamophobia. Studying the Budapest chapter of *Identitás Generáció*,⁸ Kiss (2022) explains that members of this group see themselves as the extreme right's future elite. The extremist group has organized a number of unconventional protest actions. For example, being strongly anti-Muslim and Islamophobic, they opposed the Budapest visit of the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on November 7, 2019. In order show their disgust, "they organized a 'bacon eating' performance on the Gül Baba Türbéje"—the tomb of Gül Baba, also known as Jafer, who was an Ottoman Bektashi dervish poet and companion of Sultan Suleiman, the Magnificent.⁹ With actions such as eating pork bacon, the participating members of *Identitás Generáció* aimed to humiliate Erdoğan, Gül Baba, and Muslim people in general. This was a successful action for the participating members because, for them, the tomb has a political, jihadist meaning – it is connected to the conquest of Europe by Muslims – and with the bacon eating performance, they could defy Erdoğan and, by extension, Muslims and the Hungarian government that had invited Erdoğan. In Budapest, this was only one small action, in addition to a number of other protests organized against Erdoğan's visit by Kurdish sympathizers and other mostly left-wing groups. The 'bacon eating performance' is an example of how a campaign by Fidesz led to political actions that did not lead to the responses the party desired.

Another such example is Hungary's *Identitás Generáció* campaign 'against immigration and Islamization' of Europe (Almássy, 2021). Ábel Bódi, leader of the Hungarian chapter of *Identitás Generáció*, said that members of his chapter joined the Austrian chapter led by Martin Sellner in the 'Defend Europe' campaign, which organized actions to prevent the rescue of migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea, often in ramshackle boats and on self-made floating devices (Nótin, 2019).

'Defend Europe' was certainly popular among other extremist youth groups, such as Mi Hazánk. The most recent youth-movement-turned-political-party that won six seats in parliament in the 2022 election, Mi Hazánk, uses a picture of the party members behind a 'Defend Europe' banner on their homepage.¹⁰ Bacon-eating on the tomb of Muslim

⁷ It accepted 105 refugees at first instance in 2017, 70 in 2018, 20 in 2019, and 85 refugees in 2020 (Medve, 2022).

⁸ *Identitás Generáció* is the Hungarian chapter of the Movement Identitaire which is a relatively recent pan-European, extreme right political youth movement whose ideology seeks to assert the right of Europeans, especially white people in Europe to Western culture and territories, claiming that these belong exclusively to them. The first chapter of this pro-white, anti-Muslim and anti-globalist youth movement started in France in the early 2000s and has been growing rapidly ever since (Camus & Lebourg, 2017).

⁹ Author's interview with Mate Kiss on October 27, 2022 at ELTE, Hungary. See also Kiss (2022).

¹⁰ <https://mihazank.hu/mihazankifjai/>.

historic figures, Defend Europe actions and Mi Hazánk's anti-COVID 19-lockdown protests are all performances that attract media and public attention and thus, if publicized well, are good recruiting events, all the while outflanking Fidesz in terms of right-wing extremism.

Nevertheless, salient political topics and issues are often driven by the party in power. This was certainly the case with the immigration issue in Hungary. In this regard, and despite the ingenious actions and performances of Identitás Generáció and Mi Hazánk, Fidesz today is seen as representing the will and interest of the nation against migrants and refugees who are designated as enemies and depicted as posing a threat to Hungary (Krekó et al., 2019). This plays on provincial fears and xenophobic instincts that many Hungarian citizens tend to harbor. The ramifications of Fidesz's public campaigns, the referendum, the border fence and other policies are still felt today. According to the 2022 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) study, one-third of young Hungarians could be considered hard-line nativists; these young people express strong anti-immigrant opinions that are 'exclusionary' and rigidly 'pro-assimilationist' (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 64).

4 Ultra-Nationalism based on Historic Victimhood

4.1 The Trianon Trauma

Islamophobia and xenophobia often are associated with racism and ultra-nationalism. 40% of Hungary's youth consider themselves to be 'proud Hungarians' (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 60). These feelings, like the prevailing strong anti-immigration climate, are also very much government-instigated and -driven. Margit Feischmidt (2020a) shows how what is called the 'Trianon Trauma' emerged as a 'cult' produced by memory politics in order to foster a new form of Hungarian nationalism. This ultra-right nationalism is mainly based on the re-emergence of a discourse on trauma in relation to the Trianon Treaty and the historic nostalgia related to the pre-Trianon 'Golden Age' of Hungary – the so-called 'Greater Hungary.' Many young people today deeply feel a sense of historic victimhood and nationalist nostalgia.

The 'Trianon trauma' represents an important marker of extremism in Hungary. It refers to a supposedly continuing trauma resulting from an unjust historic experience more than 100 years ago - the excision of Hungary in the post-World War I Trianon Treaty of 1920. In this treaty, Hungary lost large parts of its territory and roughly two-thirds of its pre-World War I population to neighboring states.

The vision of the past of 'Greater Hungary' thus refers to the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom before 1920. According to Feischmidt (2020a: 165), this has been revived by the Hungarian far-right scene with the aim of "creating a powerful object of fantasy that could become the cornerstone of a new nationalist discourse." The Fidesz government, and a number of other far-right actors, have spent a great amount of money and energy infusing symbolic spaces like Trianon with meanings that are associated with the country's glorious past, contrasting it with the hated, shameful predicament of today's 'small' Hungary.

The 'Golden Age' roughly overlapped with the time of Hungary's inclusion in the K&K monarchy after the Compromise of 1867. With the Compromise, Hungary became part of one established military and diplomatic alliance of two states—Austria and Hungary—ruled by one royal family, the Habsburgs. Large elements of Hungarian society strongly opposed

the compromise, seeing it as a betrayal of vital Hungarian interests and the achievements of the reforms of 1848 (Gerő, 1997). After fighting World War I on the side of the Triple Alliance (*Mittelmächte*), Hungary ended the war on the losers' side. Similar to the German and Austrian excision of territory and population when creating the Weimar and First Austrian Republics, the 1920 Treaty of Trianon created a rump Kingdom of Hungary. Hungary lost over 70% of its historic territory along with over three million Hungarians, who mostly lived in the border territories outside the new borders of the kingdom (Frucht, 2004: 360).¹¹ Partly because of the intent to win back the territories lost at Trianon, the Kingdom of Hungary, the so-called Regency, joined Nazi Germany in World War II. In early 1941, it did gain back the territories lost in Trianon, but by 1944, following heavy setbacks for the German war machine, Hungary's government negotiated secretly with the Allies an exit strategy from the war. Once Nazi Germany learned of this, Hungary was occupied within days in March of 1944. The extremist Arrow Cross Party's leader, Ferenc Szálasi, established a new Nazi-backed government, effectively turning Hungary into a German-occupied puppet state. As a consequence of the German occupation, Adolf Eichmann, with the collaboration of the Hungarian authorities, arranged for the transportation of 550.000 Hungarian Jews to extermination camps during the last days of the war, mostly Auschwitz (Cesarani, 2005). Hungary was occupied by the Red Army in 1944 and, once a Soviet satellite state, experienced state socialism between 1945-1989. While Hungary's historic experience in the 20th century is not unique, it is one of extremes.

However, this short historic synopsis alludes to the fact that Hungary historically was a diverse country with substantive Jewish and ethnic-German populations and other minorities. Today, Hungary is ethnically a relatively homogenous country. The largest ethnic minority is the Roma population, who make up 5–6% of the total residents in Hungary (Kemény & Janky, 2006, as cited in Majtényi, 2022). The proportion of the migrant population is low; the number of immigrants per 1,000 inhabitants remains well below that in most Western European countries. The crude immigration rate - the number of immigrants related to the size of the population in the destination country - has been fluctuating between 1.8 and 2.6 per 1,000 citizens since 2000, whereas, in the majority of Western European countries, this rate is greater than 5 or, in some cases, even more than 10 per 1,000 citizens (Gödri, 2015). Because most migrants settle in Budapest, the city can leave the casual visitor with the mistaken impression that Hungary is a multi-ethnic diverse country (Franz, 2022).

The 'Golden Age' is a curious tale that has been spun since modern Hungary was only quite briefly (1920-1944) an independent state after Trianon was enacted. The Hungarian imagination focuses instead on pre-Trianon 'Greater Hungary' which refers actually to the time when Hungary was the junior partner in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. In the early 2010s, Jobbik proposed the creation of a national day commemorating the 1920 Trianon treaty (Bíró-Nagy, 2022: 408). Yet only in the late 2010s, Fidesz created this national holiday and thus took ownership of this historical revisionism: The government (re)built Medieval castles such as Visegard along the Danube (Pleskovic, 2023), renamed streets and put up new statues. Ultra-nationalist actors surrounding Fidesz became the 'engine' of this new form of memory politics. The revisionism of this trauma narrative became part

¹¹ Upon the dissolution and break-up of Austria-Hungary after World War I, the Hungarian Democratic Republic and the then Hungarian Soviet Republic were briefly proclaimed in 1918 and 1919, respectively.

of the public discourse and has been boosted by recent writings of a number of historians¹² and by what Feischmidt (2020a) calls “agents of public history” who maintain memorial houses¹³, publish historical magazines and, in general, engage in the building of a nostalgia-industry.

4.2 Ethno-nationalism and Fundamental Law

The state’s role in this revisionism becomes clear when one looks at the preamble of the new constitution, the Fundamental Law, passed in 2011. In it, ‘the National Assembly declare[d] the 4th of June, the day of the enforced Peace Treaty of Trianon of 1920, a Day of National Cohesion’ (Act No. 45 of 2010, as cited by Feischmidt, 2020a: 4). The Law for National Cohesion calls the peace treaty signed on June 4th, 1920 “one of the greatest tragedies of Hungarian history” and stresses that the “political, economic, legal, and psychological problems [caused by the treaty] remain unresolved to this day” (Feischmidt, 2020a: 4). The law also asserts the existence of one ‘single Hungarian nation’ and states Hungarian communities should be based on ‘cross border cohesion’; it endeavors to link regret for lost territory with historical self-criticism and proclaims a ‘national commitment’ toward those Hungarian minority communities living today outside of the current state’s territories. The law states that the Hungarian parliament “feels obliged to call upon present members of the Hungarian nation and those of future generations to strive for national cohesion” (Feischmidt, 2020a: 4). Thus, the Fidesz government legally stipulates national solidarity and togetherness based on an ethnic understanding of what it means to be Hungarian.

The 2011 Fundamental Law and the new citizenship law codified this change from a broader national community to an ethnolinguistic communality – adopting an exclusive concept of nation. Balázs Majtényi (2022: 39) shows that new Fundamental Law provides a list of exclusive “non-neutral cohesive values such as fidelity, faith, and love, belonging to Christianity and belonging to the Hungarian ethnic nation” while not mentioning “principle[s] of equality or the protection of human rights as values.” This definition excludes the Roma minority and other long-term residents of non-Christian faiths, and fails to guarantee them basic fundamental rights. This means that today “members of recognized national minorities, such as Roma and other, non-ethnic Hungarians not considered a ‘national’ minority, such as Jews, have become secondary citizens” (Majtényi, 2022:48). The Roma have been marked by discrimination, social isolation, ethnicized poverty and structural racism (Ladányi & Szelényi, 2006). Furthermore, Majtényi (2022) points at the illiberal political system after 2010 that created institutions representing state power, which, ill-disposed to the Roma, have made matters worse.

While de facto becoming much more exclusivist as a nation, at least in ethnic terms, memory politics and revisionism overall have instigated massive feelings of victimhood and ultra-nationalism as two features of Hungary’s newly invented history and tradition

¹² For example, Archimédesz Szidiropulosz (2004) wrote a three volume monograph about Trianon and came to the conclusion that Hungarian national identity was so severely damaged that it never recovered.

¹³ For example, the House of Hungarianness (Magyarság Háza) which is a public institution devoted to supporting the development of ‘Hungarian-Hungarian relations’ and the promotion of ‘national’ values and the Trianon Museum, which was inaugurated on 4 June, 2004, in the Zichy Palace in Várpalota (Feischmidt, 2020).

(Hobsbawm, 1983). The 'Trianon Trauma' is seen as a hallmark of being Hungarian today. One young extreme right acolyte's comments regarding Hungarian history and the Trianon trauma show clearly how successful memory politics has transformed the national discourse:

"I'm enamored by Hungary's history. I view our history as endless sorrow and happiness at the same time. It's very vivid. And I think we have somewhat of a unique history. In comparison to our region, which is also very colorful. I don't think there are many countries in the world that have been punished that much, and fucked over, as we were. Like in comparison perhaps Armenia. Armenia got extremely fucked over."

The acolyte sees Hungary's history as a story of victimhood of circumstances or betrayals in general and emphasizes Trianon as one such inflection point, where the Hungarian nation was sold out. This acolyte's discursive appropriation of the concept of Trianon portrays an understanding of pre-Trianon Hungary as the natural manifestation of the Hungarian nation's territory and population – which could inspire the symbolic reconstruction of this 'Greater Hungary' in the future. For the young interviewee, the Trianon experience serves as an explanation and justification of the current political, economic, and perhaps socio-psychological situation that Hungarians are facing today. He continues:

"And I constantly bring up the example that if, for example, Czechia, the Sudetenland, would be controlled by Germany, Poland and Austria and like 30-40% of actual Czech population would actually be living there, I'm absolutely sure that Czechia would not be this prosperous, happy and stable democracy that you know today. ... We had a very very, very brief place in the sun in Hungarian history. I mean you could argue any way you want that we didn't have but during the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy, we Hungarians, we feel like we fought for that in 48 [1848]. That we deserved to have that status in the empire. And for us, that was like a place in the sun. And for a moment, even if it was just by name or something we felt like a great power and then it was ... it wasn't just taken away but we were reduced to such an extent that we just ... we were extremely violated by that."

As in other ethnic nationalist ideologies, historic victimhood plays a crucial often mobilizing role. In the Trianon trauma discourse, Hungarians, who consider themselves economically, culturally, morally and politically superior, were tricked into giving large parts of their territory and, even more importantly, their population, to inferior neighbors (Feischmidt, 2020a: 10). The young extremist explains:

"You have a sore, you have some extreme spiking around that you are not able to do your best, and that just blankets the whole of society, every strata. ... Did you know that Hungary has the largest percentage of people in Europe who think that the territory surrounding our country should be ours – 67%. We literally have this Hungarian joke that we are neighbored by ourselves. It's a very common saying and it's very sad. You literally go across the border in every direction and you go 50km, and everybody speaks Hungarian, even the Ukrainians speak Hungarian. And it was a 100 fucking years ago."

'Greater Hungary' is not only perceived as the mirror-opposite of contemporary 'smaller Hungary' but as a rallying symbol for national solidarity. With the invention of this 'old-new political tradition' (Hobsbawm, 1983) the Trianon trauma-cult addresses a widespread need for collective self-esteem and personal pride by providing adherents the opportunity to express grievances and then channelling these grievances into anger against others – neighboring states surrounding Hungary and ethnic minorities within Hungary – instead of Fidesz and associated elites. The acolyte continues:

"[...] we are neighbored by ourselves. And that just by statistics it has been proven many times that the number of Hungarian people surrounding us is much more [higher] than is originally given. Because the amount is the people that are not afraid of calling themselves Hungarian. And there are people mandated by their surroundings or by their employer or something. For example, in Romania, in Transylvania there are 7% of the people who are state-less, not state-less, nation-less on paper. What are those people? I'm sure they are not Romanian. So it's atrocious, and it's very sad."

The Trianon trauma narrative offers an avenue for overcoming personal and collective trauma through the symbolic assertion of national unity and superiority. Referring to the work of Clifford Geertz, several scholars have identified the idea of a 'nation' as a narrative, "a story which people tell about themselves in order to lend meaning to their social world" (Feischmidt, 2020a referring to Ram, 1994, citing Geertz, in Wodak et al., 1999: 11). The problem with the Trianon Trauma narrative is that it creates a meaning that is based on not only victimhood but also exclusivism, a taste of superiority, and directing aggressive feelings toward neighboring countries.

Researchers who have attempted to uncover the structural drivers underpinning support for new forms of narratives have argued that the success of new right-wing cultural and political ideologies would not have been possible without the presence of economic grievances that compel those who experience them to confront the ideological status quo and its defenders (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Sik, 2015; Piazza, 2017; Abou-Chadi et al., 2022; Feischmidt, 2020a: 11). Public celebration of national cohesion through events such as the annual commemoration of the signing of the Trianon Treaty on June 4 reinforces Hungarian victimhood and the legitimacy of the concept of ethnic citizenship and membership to the nation, excluding not only the traditional minorities such as Roma and Jews but also all more recent migrant groups. Historic revisionism initiated by the Fidesz government led to the invented ethno-nationalist grievances based on victimhood experienced more than 100 years ago. Thus, memory politics in Hungary arguably led to poor relationships with neighboring states, new forms of national inclusions and citizenship of Hungarians living abroad, and the exclusion of non-ethnic Hungarians living in Hungary. The Trianon trauma became symbol for national solidarity, and Hungary's ethno-nationalism centered on an identity of victimhood.

Just like the massive anti-immigration campaigns, the extensive historic revisionism has substantially influenced young people's views. As the 2022 FES study shows, 40% of young Hungarians are proud nationalists, and 45% harbor anti-Roma sentiments (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022). Fidesz's campaigns and policies surrounding anti-immigration and revisionism, such as the Trianon trauma, have had considerable traction and influenced young people's beliefs and perspectives. Other Fidesz campaigns gained less traction. Hungary's youth did not (entirely) buy into the narrative expressed by Fidesz public campaigns and policies focused on anti-semitism, homosexuality, and women's rights, and, influenced by other sources, altered Fidesz positions or used them in political expressions and practices that they were not intended to. In these cases, the messages of Fidesz were curiously transmuted by their intended recipients; a case in point is the 'bacon eating' protest described above.

5 Issue Adjustment: Anti-Semitism, Homosexuality, Transgender People, and Women's Rights

Extensive public opinion campaigns and historic revisionism are just two methods the Fidesz government uses in order to influence and manage the electorate. These methods are crucial, because they distract people from thinking too much about the escalating excessive corruption (Rogers, 2020; Snegovaya, 2020; Fazekas & Tóth, 2016) in the country.

5.1 Antisemitism & Sorosozás

My participatory observation experience and conversations were restricted to the city of Budapest. This might help explain the rather curious finding that extremist youth feel relatively less threatened by homosexuals than by other 'out-group' cohorts such as Roma and Muslims. This finding is supported by the 2022 FES study (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 5, 47, 49) whose authors repeatedly stress that "young [Hungarian] people are least likely [among the V4 countries] to express hostility towards homosexuals and Jews" (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 5). The acolyte I interviewed expressed objections to the strong anti-Semitism of Mi Hazánk: "I cannot do Mi Hazánk. Mi Hazánk is too radical. They are full of Holocaust deniers. It's full of Holocaust deniers. And that's just a red light for me. I can't stomach it." Young Hungarians' anti-Semitism stands at 15% and remains relatively minute (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 47).

This is somewhat surprising because the Fidesz government engaged in a massive anti-Semitic campaign featuring the Hungarian-born American Jewish billionaire George Soros. The government promoted a conspiracy theory that blamed Soros for trying to destroy Hungary and Europe's traditions and independence by sponsoring the 'invasion' of Muslim migrants (Kalmar, 2020: 7). Jenne and colleagues (2022: 47) define Sorosozás ('Soros-bashing') as a recent Hungarian neologism that is used to describe the government's practice of repetitively and reflexively associating all manner of negative local and international developments with Soros – "using a tone of rejection, condemnation, and even ridicule." In these conspiracy theories, Soros is represented as the hidden master behind NGOs, the European Union and several national governments that fostered multiculturalism with such woke issues as gay rights and gender equality, all depicted as an attack on the values of the Christian world (Kalmar, 2020). Indeed, the fact that Sorosozás effectively rallied popular support for Orbán's regime indicates the existence of relatively strong and hidden anti-Semitic features in the broader Hungarian society. Nevertheless, young extremists seem to be more Islamophobic than anti-Semitic. The 2022 FES study found that 40% of young Hungarians harbor anti-Muslim feelings but only 15% are anti-Semitic (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022).

Studying the Budapest chapter of *Identitás Generáció*, Kiss (2022) explains the existence of a multi-layered reality of anti-Semitism in the modern extreme right groups. He notes that officially, "of course, they are not anti-Semitic. It's a thing of the past and, of course, we should concentrate on new enemies, like Islam and Muslim people. Well, basically non-Europeans" (see also, Kiss, 2020). However, Kiss remembers during his fieldwork that, in various instances, members of *Identitás Generáció* made references to, for example, the 'inbreeding among Jews' but they would not share such sentiments in official statements

and 'on tape'.¹⁴ An estimated 75.000 to 100.000 Jewish people live in Hungary – which is the largest Jewish population in East Central Europe (World Jewish Congress [WJC], 2023). Most Hungarian Jews live in Budapest, and Hungary has a high proportion of Holocaust survivors. In addition, intermarriage is widespread. According to WJC, Hungarian Jews are especially well represented in science and academia. These might all be reasons why the Soros campaign did not influence the extremists I spoke with in the manner one would assume. And, as Kalmar (2020) points out, in some instances anti-Semitism might also have been replaced by Islamophobia.

5.2 LGBTQ & Trans Rights

The lack of anti-Semitism is not the only traditional extreme-right feature that is ambiguous, and in some instances appears absent from the narrative. In addition, the acolyte I interviewed clearly expressed a degree of tolerance toward homosexuals, when he stated:

“Even though I don't like very hard LGBTQ propaganda, and changing society in this way, I still think that these people exist and they should have a right to life and stuff. I'm not against gay people marrying either. I think it has been a very common part of the human experience that someone is gay.”

To be sure, the FES Study (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022) emphasizes that, in comparison to other V4 countries, Hungary has the highest rate of young people who feel they would be disturbed by the presence of a gay neighbors (19%). However, the lines to other minorities are blurry. In contrast to rather tolerant attitudes toward homosexuals, this interviewee had very strong negative feelings about trans people:

“But that's not the same for transgender people. It's a different book ... Do you know the Trevor's Institute? No? It's like the biggest LGBTQ NGO in the US. And they have statistics about suicide rates in the US. And they have this specific statistic about transgender people. During the last 10 years the suicide rate for transgender people is 50%. It's absolutely over-represented in society. And even though you make all these changes in society, you make all these inclusive language ... and bathrooms and everything, this number does not budge. One single second. It's horrific. It must be horrible to wake up one day and not like the appendage you are born to. It's fucking impossible to imagine. I'm saying that these people in my mind have very serious psychological disorders that should not be solved by changing every little part of society around them. I'm fine with them changing their appearance if it actually helps them. But the vast majority does actually not. But I really don't think telling a 16-year old girl that cutting off her tits actually and changing her appendage is going to solve the stuff that she feels in her head. I'm very hellbent on that fact. You know there is this extreme medical lobby behind this; they perform these operations and everything. The problem is that I think I know how people who are this unstable think and if you are in a place of that sorrow if you actually lift your hands up and tell them: “Boy, oh boy, your happiness is just on the other side of this \$300.000 operation!” they are going to want it. And it's very sad. I think the whole thing is disgusting.”

Although traditional extreme right anti-trans language also describes trans people as mentally ill, these comments differ by how strongly they emphasize the supposed psychological illnesses surrounding trans issues. These opinions fall in line with the popular and false assumptions about gender-affirming care as being 'child abuse' and that trans children are being 'chemically castrated' (SPLC, 2021). In his 2014 blog post

¹⁴ Oct. 27 interview, see footnote 4.

called 'Transphobia is Perfectly Natural' Gavin McInnis, the Canadian far-right commentator and founder of the Proud Boys, describes the process of transitioning as one of self-mutilation. While in principal agreeing with this definition, the Hungarian interviewee sees trans-care as a feature of the American progressive society, which in his eyes, is not healthy.

Trans issues may be a political issue in Hungary but, practically, they are a non-issue: Hungary's parliament passed a law to end legal recognition for trans people in the spring of 2020, and legal gender changes in the country have effectively been frozen since 2017 (Walker, 2020).

5.3 Women's Rights & Feminism

A recent multinational study by Andrew Penner et al. (2023) found that, in Hungary, the gender gap in earnings among those aged 30–55 years is relatively small and hovers at 10%. That study also shows that almost all of the pay differences in employment in Hungary occur in jobs where men and women do the same work for the same employer but women earn 10% less. Among young Hungarians, it almost seems young women were expecting this. In the FES study (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 21) 7% more women than men said they worked outside their professional field (39% vs 32%), and 10% more women said they were overqualified for their job (38% vs 28%). Pointing toward systemic discrimination against women, these findings are also reflected in the interviews I conducted. In terms of women's rights and feminism, the young extremist expressed only vaguely veiled misogyny, strongly opposing what he called 'postmodern feminism' based on his experience being enrolled in an undergraduate course that had been taught by an 'American-educated feminist':

"Last time, when I was doing my B.A., I had this immense enlightened thing that my opinion didn't matter because I was a cis-gender white man, patriarch, a fuck head. You know that experience turns you away from foreigners for a fucking life time. Because I dare to question the gender wage gap. It's a very enlightening experience to not have your opinion matter because you are part of the oppressing group. It's fucking unbelievable. ... My problem with postmodern feminists is that they think that all women want to be like men. And that is literally degrading women. For example in Germany 97% of women believe that men and women should be equal. There are 8 or 9% who claim that they are feminist. ... For me, feminism means dominating men, oppressing them!"

The acolyte's interpretation of and his exposure to feminist ideology seems to be in line with the 'Manosphere's' ideological mix of misogyny and white supremacy in the U.S.A. and other countries of the global North (ADL, 2018). The interviewee does not hate all women – as many Incels (Involuntary Celibates) claim they do – but he adheres to biological essentialism when speaking about women. He also emphasizes that he has been victimized as a white Hungarian man by Western educated feminists. His interpretation of feminism is similar to the US-American Proud Boys members' view that women are taking over men's roles and earning more university degrees; and that men – especially white Christian men – are becoming marginalized (SPLC, n.d.). However, in most countries of the North-West, these messages are prevalent in the 'men's rights' blogosphere and online message boards, such as Reddit's RedPill forum, that promote a

toxic version of masculinity.¹⁵ By contrast, in Hungary, 'gender' has been politicized by the Fidesz government itself as 'gender ideology' which supposedly threatens 'traditional' families, children's identity and, overall, the future of Europe. Rather than feminism or women's rights, the term 'gender ideology' is used in publicly-funded news outlets, in order to polarize society and keep anxiety levels high. The government referenced 'gender ideology' in its refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention¹⁶ and in its 2018 decision to remove accreditation from gender studies M.A. programs in Hungarian universities.

In general, the acolyte's perspective has been facilitated by the Fidesz government's application of a politics of symbolism regarding gender studies. This young acolyte is very much in line with implied messages of misogyny when stating that "feminism [note: not gender!] means dominating men, oppressing them." Fidesz government representatives adhered in their public statements to using the term 'gender' rather than 'feminism.' For example, László Kövér, one of the founders of Fidesz, repeatedly referred in his speeches to 'gender craziness', that will result in Hungary being a "futureless society of man-hating women and feminine men living in dread of women" or compares what he calls 'genderism' to "a human experiment that is nothing better than, let's say, eugenics in Nazi times" (quoted in Zsubori, 2018). The explanation for why the term 'gender' began to symbolize an entire range of anti-feminist, pro-patriarchy stances is, at first, surprising.

The word 'gender' does not exist in Hungarian. Using the English word in this 'least anglophone EU country' is confusing for many Hungarian people – which comes in handy for the Fidesz government that seeks to demonize it (Zsubori, 2018). Furthermore, as Eszter Kováts (2020: 13) shows, there is a strong link between the introduction of the field of 'gender studies' and the post-socialist neoliberal economic policy in the country. Her argument is based on Susan Zimmermann's (2007) findings that describe how implementing gender studies in the countries of the former Eastern bloc in the 1990s was less a commitment to gender equality and to gaining more knowledge in the field than to the values of liberal democracy and the ensuing social-economic order as enacted in Anglo-Saxon countries. Along the same lines, Andrea Pető (2018: 2) emphasizes that gender as a category of analysis arrived in Central Europe together with the neoliberal market economy and Anglo-Saxon dominance in science after 1989. This so-called

¹⁵ While there were some similarities between the language used by American and Hungarian extremists, it seems Hungarian young acolytes often use ultra-nationalism to frame their misogynist expressions. For example, one infamous post of the extremist US blogger, Matt Forney, expresses his anti-female sentiments on the Men's Rights Activists website 'Return of Kings' in the following way: "The vagina is the perfect representation of the nature of females. An empty vessel, a hole, a void with no identity of its own. Without a man to fill her with his essence, she is as useless as a crabapple rotting on the sidewalk" (cited in ADL, 2018). White supremacists frequently refer to women as 'thots,' which stands for "that ho over there" (ADL, 2018). These statements emphasize misogyny as the core feature, while the acolyte I interviewed stressed nationalism to be above all else. For example, he asked: "You know who has the largest dicks?" After I didn't reply, he insisted that polls have shown that it's clear that Hungarians have "the largest dicks" in Europe.

¹⁶ The Istanbul Convention is the first legally binding instrument which "creates a comprehensive legal framework and approach to combat violence against women" and is focused on preventing domestic violence, protecting victims and prosecuting accused offenders (<https://rm.coe.int/arm-2021-coe-istanbul-convention-handbook-for-parliamentarians-eng-081/1680a4cf89>).

‘Europeanization’ – the notion that gender equality in Western terms became a condition for ‘joining Europe’ – became part of the field of women’s and LGBTQ rights (Valkovičová, 2017). Considering that in most socialist countries women had achieved political and legal equality chronologically much earlier than in many Western capitalist countries and that the new economic realities under liberalism and democracy resulted in massive distress and prolonged financial hardships, the concern with gender issues (as with other identity issues) might have appeared strange and alien to many who were struggling to make ends meet. Nevertheless, the Fidesz government not only intentionally uses the misleading expression ‘gender ideology’, but also questions the educational relevance of gender studies.

In practical terms, Orbán reduced women’s rights to family policies, such as preferential loans for newly-wed couples planning to have children or exemptions from personal income tax payments for women who have given birth to and raised at least four children (Kováts, 2020: 85-86). Hungary’s family policy is clearly narrowly construed as a demographic policy, excluding such issues as the education system, child poverty, or care for the elderly. However, among women of the middle and lower class, the policy addresses what Maxine Molyneux (1985) calls ‘practical gender interests’, that is, the interests that arise within the constraints of a given gender order, of course without questioning the order itself. Most Hungarians – men and women alike – experience paid work as exploitation (Gregor & Kováts, 2019; Grzebalska & Kováts, 2018). In this context, the main concern of women is not how to manage household and family duties while working, but rather how to escape the workplace to be able to spend time at home with their families, “while making a decent living from one job (not two or three), in which a primary objective would be an 8- rather than a 12-hour workday” (Kováts, 2020: 87). Therefore, many Hungarian women welcome government policies that support family incomes and allow women to spend less time at work. Indeed, this phenomenon partially explains the popularity of Fidesz among women.

The first gender studies program was launched in Autumn Semester of 2017 at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), the largest public university in Hungary. In addition to cleverly playing into the economic interests of whole classes of women, the Fidesz government led the resistance against gender studies programs. The government argued that the traditional family model was under threat by transgender and queer activism, implying that these were key elements of the curriculum for gender studies. These narratives were designed to create fears of transgender and queer people and implicitly propagated the idea that gender studies can create and contribute to change in the mainstream society. However, although the 2017 ‘gender ideology’ campaign may have had some success, it did not affect young Hungarians as strongly as the anti-migration campaign that ran during the same period did. According to the FES study (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 48), among young Hungarians only 10 % would feel very bad if a gay family moved in next door, 9% would feel bad and a total 73% would be not be bothered by it – nearly one third would have no opinion (29%), and nearly one quarter of young Hungarians would feel good (23%) or very good (21%) about their new gay neighbors.¹⁷

¹⁷ 6% said they do not know and 2 % did not answer the question.

6 Analysis

A defining feature of Hungary's political system is the use of ongoing campaigns paid for by public funds, based on hate-filled propaganda that target alleged enemies, such as immigrants and George Soros. The majority of Fidesz' public opinion campaigns has been remarkably influential in the sense that they achieved their objective to distract and divide the population and escalate irrational fears and anxieties. In some instances, however, the results have included unintended consequences. With these campaigns, the Fidesz government has turned the state into an active agent of the extreme right in order to keep the electorate focused on identity issues and to deflect from the rising Hungarian illiberalism and rampant corruption (Rogers, 2020; Snegovaya, 2020; Fazekas & Tóth, 2016).

Many Fidesz parliamentarians and some of Orbán's close friends have become successful business owners, and this fact has not gone unnoticed. A majority of young people, for example, are aware that in order to get a good job it is important to know the right people.¹⁸ According to the FES Study (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 31), six out of ten young Hungarians consider networking with influential people more important than experience abroad when looking for a job (61%), and a majority of respondents (56%) believe that one needs good contacts with the government to succeed in Hungary (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 78). It is well known that corruption is wide-spread and normalized.¹⁹ So much so that in Budapest, the city with the largest opposition to Orbán's party, many young people use a phone app – ingeniously called 'NOligarchia' – that allows customers to avoid frequenting those bars and restaurants that are (co-)owned by Fidesz parliamentarians.

While still featured prominently in Fidesz's political platform and used as red herrings in large public-opinion campaigns, anti-Semitism, homosexuality, and women's rights apparently influenced the population, and, as shown in this study, young people, but not necessarily as planned. Not all right-wing youth are anti-Semitic, and while misrepresentations of feminism and wide-spread misogyny is a feature of extremist-right groups, not all Hungarian young right-wing acolytes are rigidly opposed to women's rights such as abortion. My informant, for example, explained:

“When I was [younger] I was not nationalistic at all. I very much disliked being Hungarian. And then ... I was growing up. And in the West the left became more, more radical and not to my taste ... [with] politically correct culture and woke-ism, and everything like that. I listen to the arguments. And I cannot comprehend them, [but] I'm pro-choice. I think abortion should be allowed until a reasonable time. If someone cannot decide within three months, I think they

¹⁸ This has long been a theme in Hungarian society – see Zsigmond Moricz's 1932 novel *Relations*.

¹⁹ I spent last fall in Budapest on a Fulbright Scholar award. The Hungarian Fulbright Commission organized the final holiday party in the cafe Scruton, named after the conservative English philosopher Roger Scruton. The cafe is owned by Zoltan Szalai, who is on the board of Matthias Corvinus College and also runs a glossy, pro-government weekly called *Mandiner*. The cafe received a \$2 million donation of once-public money for use as an event space in 2021. When I pointed out to Károly Jókay, the Director of the Hungarian Fulbright Commission, that the owner was a well-known member of the extreme right, he looked somewhat puzzled and asked how I knew this. I believe that he was surprised not that the owner (Szalai) was a member of the extreme right, but that I knew this fact.

should keep it. I think that the mother should decide, [or] if it actually risks their life, if they want to kill it. I'm not in line with American conservatism. I'm Hungarian. We always had abortions."

Like other comments by this acolyte, the comment about "politically correct culture and woke-ism" in this statement signals a critical view of so-called Western and especially American 'liberal' values which is one key feature of the extreme right in Hungary. A number of authors (Gyáni, 2012; Feischmidt & Pulay, 2017) who study right-wing youth culture found that acolytes reject Western 'individualistic materialism' and instead often articulate that they more highly value community and belonging than individualism, and more value national heritage than the pursuit of liberty. For Feischmidt (2020a), this resistive stance came in the form of a roughly sketched anti-globalism, of which a critique of cultural liberalism was an explicit, and anti-capitalism an implicit element. Similarly to extremist youth groups in Germany and other countries where new nationalistic and far-right popular cultures ('*rechtsextreme Alltagskultur*'; Langebach & Raabe, 2009; Miller-Idriss, 2018) are flourishing, young radical Magyars use their own national clothing brands (Molnar, 2016) and music (Feischmidt & Pulay, 2017)²⁰ and have created their own cultural activities – called heritage work – surrounding their involvement in historical re-enactment activities, including the revival of 'old' rituals, crafts, and cultural traditions. Feischmidt (2020a: 164) concludes that a generational shift in extremist youth culture is under way in Hungary today; it is a development that is motivated by the overall rejection of the secular, cosmopolitan and individualistic agenda of the globalized Western and American liberal elites. Instead, Hungarian extremism centers upon an identity that encompasses ethno-national superiority and historic victimization, and is based on a conservative ethos that underpins this reactionary tendency (Holmes, 2010). This might explain the anger that the acolyte expressed repeatedly when referring to the U.S.A. For example, he states:

"[Americans] think of themselves as this all-knowing God-being who has all the information and knows better than anybody. And Americans have this gene and it's fucking disgusting. They are raised like this actually. And this radical individualism that is implemented in the minds of American people is just atrocious. And it creates mental problems. Immense mental problems."

Interestingly, while very critical toward American culture and identity, the acolyte is strongly pro-EU and pro-Russia. He states:

"And I very much love the EU for the single reason that, even though it is more humanitarian than I would think [is necessary], ... the EU takes care of the consumer, e.g. the controls that the EU mandates on food production, health care, etc. I think that in the U.S. people are much more treated like cattle. In the U.S., in the Anglo-Saxon perspective, you are an individual and you have to take care of yourself. The government is not going to."

However, Europe is different. Drawing a clear distinction between the U.S. and the EU, the acolyte does not believe that Hungary's illiberalism might become problematic for the country's EU membership. Instead, he states: "I don't think the [Hungarian government] system is incompatible with something the EU can tolerate. I really don't think that. [...] Institutional corruption and clientelism is a necessity of the system." In addition, the acolyte explained that he is working for a Russian import-export company and claimed:

²⁰ Hungarian 'national rock' was born from a fusion of skinhead rock music and folk rock music. Lyrics typically blend radical political critique (anti-establishment, anti-globalism, anti-liberalism) with old national mythology.

“I’m a Russophile; I’m [currently] learning Russian: Hungary has a very big interest in keeping Russia in Europe.” The acolyte’s kind of ultra-nationalism and chauvinism leads in turn to an understanding of what good government entails in Hungary. When referring to Fidesz’ public campaigns, he states:

“I tell my intellectual friends that [Fidesz’s messages] are not made for you [the well-educated]. It’s made for the 60% that can actually be motivated and manipulated by these messages. And I do agree that the vast majority of people should be led, one way or another. And without much government control this is a very hard thing to do. And having this soft dictatorship that Fidesz had built up is the best of the worst options.”

While this quotation also exemplifies the interviewee’s identity as being part of the extremist elite, he is not alone with these beliefs based on autocratic rule. Of the young Hungarians polled by FES (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 58), 44% believe democracy is not a good form of government. According to a majority of young Hungarians (57%), the country needs a strong leader. This is a remarkably high proportion given that, in the other countries of the region, only one-third of young people (29–35%) feel the same way. The acolyte’s justification for this anti-democracy stance lies in Hungary’s past and unique geopolitical identity:

“If I open a history book, its fucking amazing what Hungarians have done. We were never a country that had a huge middle class. It was always the elite doing things. And there was always the proletariat, doing the things that the elite hasn’t. They were suffering. You can call it whatever you want. And this western vision of us being [like] the Americans or the Austrians just does not resonate with Hungarians.”

Furthermore, the young man has a clear affinity for fascism, referencing the ideology repeatedly. For example, in order to explain his attitude toward anti-Semitism, he stated: “I don’t think that Fascism necessarily involves an animosity against Jews. But it has to have an enemy. People need to have an enemy.” Referring to the ‘Trianon Trauma’ as revisionism, the acolyte explains his conundrum with democracy in the following way:

“Revisionism and democracy are absolutely incompatible. Because the [democratic] institutions do not [allow] revisionism take place. The control of the national institutions that they are put there for that exact purpose that no longer can have such power to do something like that. And that’s something in the back of my head that I like about Fidesz because, for me, that’s the regime that somehow would be able to do this [be an illiberal autocracy] and still is tolerable.

The interviewee was clearly aware that his nationalism is not complementary with democratic forms of government. Justifying his autocratic stance, he explained: “But I really like the basic idea of a society as a whole and the government should be the one that comes first and not the individual. That sounds extremely Orwellian but I really like the idea.” Furthermore, for him, it has to be government leading the people rather than the people voting for the government they aspire to have, because: “I know for sure that the vast majority of people doesn’t know what’s good for them. That’s why I think the government should mandate what is good for people and what is not.” While much of his ‘internalist’ perspective reflects the current political situation regarding Hungary’s role in the EU, the acolyte’s anti-democratic ideology combined with Hungarian misogyny shows a more differentiated picture of extremist youth in Hungary today.

However, not all young people may be able to connect the Trianon trauma to revisionism and autocratic rule. Surprisingly, therefore, only relatively few young people in Hungary

(14%) believe that dictatorship might be better than democracy (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 59). However, in combination with the large cohort of young people who have checked out of the political discourse (80%), this data illustrates the large disgruntlement with the current system and the lack of interest in getting involved in politics even on a rudimentary level. An important repercussion of disenchantment that young people feel and their consequent non-involvement in politics is that a small minority of ultra-right wing youth can exert a disproportionate influence on the political system.

The FES 2022 study found that within the V4 region, young Hungarians report the lowest willingness to participate in hypothetical future elections (71%) (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 56). The study shows that Hungarian youth seem to be highly fragmented in terms of ideological preference between liberal pro-Western on the one hand and nationalist and pro-Russia on the other. However, a large majority of young Hungarians are anti-immigration (63%) and 40% are proud of their Hungarian citizenship. Hungarian youth is quite diverse with a large cohort who is critical of the Orbán government and an at least equally large segment that has bought into pro-Fidesz and extreme right ideologies – the FES study (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022: 65) considers one-third of young Hungarians ‘hard-line nativists’ - and distrustful of democratic forms of government.

This finding stands in rigid contrast to my personal experience, teaching at ELTE during the fall semester. My more than 40 students adhered to various political ideologies but none of them saw themselves on the extreme right of the political spectrum. Moreover, none of them said that they have friends or acquaintances who adhered to the right. As an English-speaking professor and Fulbright Scholar in Budapest for four months, it was remarkably difficult to find extreme right youth who were willing to be interviewed. There may be a number of reasons for this – for example, the fact that Budapest is an ethnically diverse city. In contrast to the relative homogenous countryside and smaller cities, Budapest hosts most of the country’s immigrants – more than 90,500 migrants reside in the city (Medve 2022) – and attracts millions of tourists each year. In 2019, the last year prior to the COVID pandemic, 4.4 million tourists visited Budapest (Medve, 2023). According to the Hungarian Tourist Bureau, tourism accounted for more than 13% of the country’s GDP in 2019, and the industry provides about 10% of Hungary’s total employment (Franz 2022). For residents in Budapest, the exposure to out-group members seems to occur frequently because Magyars, tourists and migrants live side by side, and it is thus impossible to avoid contact with non-Hungarians. Studying, living and working with each other creates a closeness that alleviates the worst stereotypes of others.

7 In Conclusion

By pulling together information from sources ranging from a large survey to interviews with Hungarian researchers who are experts on the radical right, to a literature review and in-person observation at right wing rallies in Budapest in late 2022, to an in-depth interview with one extremist young acolyte, certain new insights about right wing extremist youth in Hungary, and about the role of Fidesz as a catalyst for the spread of right wing extremism, were revealed.

This paper’s ‘internalist perspective’ fleshed out individual and collective trends among Hungarian youth, especially members of extremist youth groups. Overall, Hungary’s youth is more anti-immigrant and xenophobic and more ultranationalist in a chauvinistic, ethnically exclusivist way than are other right wing young people. The key to understanding

this strong xenophobia and ultra-nationalism lies in the Fidesz government's long periods of publicly funded campaigns which magnified the barely disguised mistrust for strangers and ethnic minorities in the country, and its revisionist policies. The government's anti-immigration campaign was especially successful and led to a substantial rise in xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiments, not just among the right but also in the mainstream population. Fidesz's revisionist history campaign to invent a great past that was supposedly lost due to international deception has largely succeeded in increasing many Magyars' nativist feelings, which include also strong notions of resentment towards non-Hungarians whom they see as responsible for the lasting trauma produced by the Trianon Treaty. This is also true for young Hungarians. Indeed, extreme nationalist feelings and strong xenophobia go hand in hand in Hungary. As a result, there are widespread feelings of historic victimhood, domestic ethno-nationalism against the Roma population and migrant communities, and support of an aggressive foreign policy towards countries that are Hungary's neighbors.

While anti-immigration campaigns and 'memory politics' (Feischmidt, 2020a) were highly effective in distracting and dividing Hungarians by escalating irrational mistrust and anxieties, other measures produced less clear-cut results, especially in the youth cohorts, and may even have resulted in some embarrassments for Fidesz, for example, the 'bacon eating' performance on the tomb of Gül Baba to protest the visit of Erdogan in November of 2019. Other government efforts, such as the Sorosozás and 'gender ideology' campaigns, were less effective in producing a conformist youth: Young Hungarians are not necessarily anti-Semitic and do not buy into traditional tropes of womanhood (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022). For example, the extremist interviewee articulated a somewhat ambivalent stance toward Jewish people, but stood firm regarding the Holocaust and the history of Jewish people in the region, as well as regarding abortion and gay rights.²¹

Regarding other topics such as trans rights – that had been regulated out of existence in Hungary already in 2017 – the FES (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó, 2022) poll is silent. However, in the interview, the extremist acolyte has a strong opinion that aligns in many ways with the typical 'manosphere' narrative. Overall, strongly exclusivist nationalist feelings dominated the interviewees viewpoint on many issues, including migrants, gender and history.

The FES study found strong nationalist trends among Hungarian youth overall. The notion that both the members of the Hungarian chapter of Identitás Generáció and our interviewee understand themselves as intellectual elites, in contrast to far right youth in the US, for example, who are often anti-elite and anti-intellectual - brings new insights to the field and allows for potentially new ways to reach these young people. This also fits with Orban's plans to build a college that, in the future, will become one of the major flagship institutions, breeding Hungary's next generation of right-wing elites who will run the country for the next decades. The Mathius Corvinus Collegium (MCC), a richly endowed elite college, has been created for that purpose. In 2019 the government funding for MCC was greater than the total combined budget of Hungary's 27 other institutions of higher

²¹ As mentioned above, it was difficult to find extreme right youth who were willing to be interviewed in depth as was this acolyte. Fortunately, the Hungarian-speaking experts on right wing youth with whom I conducted in-depth interviews had done extensive interviews with extremist youth living in both the countryside and the cities. Non-Hungarian researchers should be aware of how difficult access to extreme right youth can be, especially to those residing in Budapest.

education (Laffitte & Léotard, 2021). This sort of funding allowed MCC to invite some of the extreme right's international celebrities, such as the former Fox News political commentator, Tucker Carlson, and Niall Ferguson, senior fellow at the conservative Hoover Institute and author of *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011). Other universities did not do so well. For example, ELTE, the largest public institution and the only one in Budapest that has so far successfully opposed Fidesz' influence on teaching and research, saw their public funding cut and had to work on a shoe-string budget which led to frigid classrooms and early winter breaks, simply because the heating bill could not be paid. However, considering the generous scholarships provided for students at MCC on the one hand and the cold classrooms at ELTE on the other, it is curious that MCC's spacious, warm classrooms are half empty and ELTE's cold classrooms are overfilled with young, eager students. Apparently, in Budapest, it seems the vast majority of young people are much more interested in professors whose research and teaching still adheres to the principals of objectivity, freedom of speech and academic freedom, rather than the government-funded restrictive teachings and research in support of an illiberal, xenophobic and nationalist Hungary. And popularity matters. The one practical implication this article strongly supports is that Western scholars should visit Hungary's colleges and universities, especially the few free and chronically underfunded ones, give lectures and speeches, and help open doors – both metaphysical and real ones - for the next generation of young Hungarians who are very curious and interested in learning about how things are done in other countries.

Of course, further research is needed to uncover more details about the self-understanding of young Hungarian extremists, specifically the particular elements of extremist thought among young people that differentiate them from other countries' extremists. In addition, it would be valuable to better understand the differences between those youth who reacted to the Fidesz campaigns by becoming more right wing and extreme in their views, those who rejected these campaigns, and those who simply became disenchanted with politics and disassociated from them.

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