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Hungarian Nationalism in Orbán's Era: The Case of Martfű

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Abstract

Based on the discursive analysis of 28 semidirected interviews conducted in the small industrial town of Martfű, this article reflects on the role played by nationalism in the construction of political and cultural hegemony by Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz*, Hungary's ruling party since 2010. The ten themes mobilised by the respondents to express their vision of the Hungarian nation (identification, belonging, commitment, transmission, territory, uniqueness/fragility, heterogeneity/homogeneity, unity/division, east/west, and insubordination) and the issues attached to them (relationship to Hungarian minorities of neighbouring countries, relationship to the European Union, immigration, etc.) are paralleled with *Fidesz*'s discourse. On those subjects, Orbán's party's nationalism positions itself in a "central" way, managing to incarnate heterogeneous conceptions of the nation that are shared among this research's respondents by *Fidesz* as well as non-*Fidesz* voters.

Keywords: Hungary; *Fidesz*; nationalism; hegemony; Martfű

Continuously re-elected since 2010, *Fidesz*, the radical nationalist and conservative party of Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán, is an iconic case illustrating, in Central and Eastern Europe but also more broadly in the West, the method by which right-wing populist political parties mobilise nationalism to win elections (Enyedi 2015; Gueorguieva 2017; Krakovsky 2019; Stanley 2017). Some academic researchers present this articulation as a way for *Fidesz* to position itself on the right side of the political spectrum to appeal to a certain fringe of the electorate. By adopting an ethnic and conservative nationalism, *Fidesz* is supposedly constructing a conception of the nation, which is – successfully – opposed to the civic conception defended by its liberal left-wing opponents (Feischmidt 2014; Fowler 2007; Palonen 2011). In parallel, nationalism is also presented as a strategy by which social grievances against neoliberalism are redirected from the economic elites to figures constructed as alien to the Hungarian nation (Barta 2011; Halmai 2011).

While not rejecting these interpretations, the aim of this article is to nuance and expand on them by suggesting that *Fidesz*'s nationalism plays a more structural role in its grip on power, one that has to do with the achievement of political and cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1975; Laclau and Mouffe 2009). Indeed, while Orbán's party has used the left-wing/right-wing dichotomy to build its political identity and extensively included ethnic and conservative aspects in its nationalism, its discourse cannot be reduced to these elements, and this research's results show that it can reach far beyond right-wing voters. Likewise, this research also indicates that nationalism should not be reduced to a diversion from socioeconomic issues but approached as genuine scope from which politics are apprehended in Hungary.

This is supported by the discursive analysis of 28 semidirected interviews conducted in the industrial town of Martfú (6 169 inhabitants in 2017) in southeastern Hungary. The firmly heterogeneous character of the conceptions of the nation expressed in the interviews, which equates to Fidesz's conception, shows that through its nationalism, Orbán's party does more than strengthen its electorate or channel the opposition to neoliberalism. It also allows him to occupy a central position in the national "zone of conflict" (Hutchinson 2005), a political and cultural battleground where, at least according to this research's interviews, it has achieved hegemony. In this logic, nationalism appears to be both a framework and channel by which Fidesz's discourse integrates and reorganises the population's common sense, thus rendering its worldview as "normal" or "acceptable" for *Fidesz* as well as for non-*Fidesz* voters.

The interviews, conducted in Hungarian and lasting from 50 minutes to four hours, were conducted during the fall of 2020 and the spring of 2021, with 15 men and 13 women of voting age inhabiting Martfú¹. They were selected progressively through the principles of "open interview body" and "snowball effect", which means a respondent would be asked, at the end of an interview, to propose another respondent to the interviewer, and so on (Bertaux 2010; Nossik 2011; Weber and Beaud 2010). Once a "saturation point" was reached in the variations between the recorded answers (Bertaux 2010; Jäger 2001) (in this case after 19 or 20 interviews), the following interviews were completed to insure a certain degree of diversification (according to age and profession) and parity (according to gender and political preferences).

Similarly, the choice of Martfú as a research location was motivated by the aim of diversifying the respondents' profile. The town is situated in an agricultural setting of the Great Hungarian Plain, but developed itself mainly around its industries (building materials, shoes, beer and vegetable oil factories) which gave it a strong working class culture, especially under the socialist regime. This means that Martfú's population is the result of various influxes, from peasant families from the surrounding area to workers or private and public service executives from all around Hungary, and even from the Hungarian minorities of the surrounding countries. At the same time, if the town's electoral results follow the national tendencies, the opposition parties are more strongly represented², which allows a stronger political diversification of the respondents. In that respect, the aim of this research is not to provide a representative account leading to general conclusions, but to propose, through as in-depth and heterogeneous materials as possible, new avenues of investigation and theorization (Bertaux 2010; Kaufman 1996; Weber and Beaud 2010) on the nature of Fidesz's rule and on the relationship between nationalism and hegemony.

To this end, the respondents answered a preestablished interview protocol that, through open-ended questions addressing diverse concepts (nation, people, homeland, Hungary, conservatism and liberalism, left-wing and right-wing, etc.) and issues (major historical events, European integration, party politics, immigration, etc.) aimed to provide a picture of their relation to the Hungarian nation and nationalism. The transcribed interviews were submitted to a discursive and thematic analysis, providing ten transversal themes expressed by the respondents. These themes were then paralleled with Fidesz's nationalist discourse, as represented in secondary literature.

This article is divided into three sections. First, it briefly exposes this research's discursive approach to nationalism and then shows that the respondents express a common nationalist perspective on politics, which they share with *Fidesz*. Second, the article exposes the ten themes mobilised by the respondents, divided into three categories corresponding to so many aspects of the Hungarian nation expressed in the interviews: reproduction (identification, belonging, commitment and transmission), shape (territory, uniqueness/fragility and heterogeneity/homogeneity) and character (unity/division, east/west and insubordination). These are paralleled with Fidesz's discourse, showing that its nationalism embodies all these themes and the issues attached to them (relationship to the Hungarian minorities of the neighbouring countries, relationship to the European Union (EU), immigration, etc.) in a "central" way. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion exploring the links between nationalism and hegemony.

Nationalist Politics

This article adopts a discursive approach of nation and nationalism. Building on Anderson's canonic definition (2002), it conceives the nation as a discursively constructed political community, structurally linked to modernity, which defines its main features: the existence or the aspiration to a modern and sovereign State, modern geopolitical borders and a modern conception of the "people" (which can be defined by heterogenous signifiers), at the heart of the legitimization of the community (De Cleen 2017; Freitag 2018; Wimmer 2002). In that logic, nationalism is a discourse "by which nation-states are reproduced" (Billig 1995, 6) and aiming at hegemony (De Cleen 2017; Torfing 1999) by constructing collective identities (Brubaker 1996, 2001) through chains of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe 2009). It legitimates the nation-state as the prime location from which politics should be approached and individuals should be bounded and situated. By that logic, even the more "banal" manifestations of national consciousness are considered as dimensions of nationalism (Billig 1995). For example, as discussed later in this article, a positive emotional response to the Hungarian national anthem or to a sporting success on the international level can all be inserted into that category, as they relate to national bonding, and contribute to reproduce the nation in everyday life. Thus, to achieve hegemony, nationalism must integrate common sense to hold "the political community together" (Snir 2016, 270). The mobilisation of different kinds of signifiers in different discursive configurations means that nationalism can carry and institutionalise a variety of forms and meanings, symbols and practices, which are always subject to competing attempts at appropriation by political opponents, contributing to a sometimes consensual, sometimes conflictual, reproduction of the nation on an everyday basis and in the long term (Billig 1995; Dembińska 2018; Hutchinson 2005).

From that perspective, it can be stated that Fidesz's nationalism is "central" to the views expressed in the interviews first because the respondents overwhelmingly share a nationalist perspective with Hungary's ruling party. What may sound as evidence considering Hungary's present political context was far from obvious before making the interviews. Indeed, with Martfű's long-term working-class culture and a stronger support for the left-liberal parties than the national average, one might have expected that cosmopolitanism or anti-nationalism would have occupied a stronger place among the respondents. Quite the opposite: concepts such as nation and nation-state, as well as national belonging or identity, far from being questioned or challenged, are considered obvious, as exemplified by this quote:

I had a very interesting conversation [...] [w]ith a guy [of Croatian origin]. But his revered grandmother was Hungarian. [...] [B]ut he couldn't speak Hungarian. And we were forced to speak in English. [...] And... It was really interesting because... [...] The way of thinking... He had it inside him. That peculiar Hungarian way of thinking. (1)

Here, nationality is self-evident and objectified to the point that it takes the shape of a "Hungarian way of thinking", which is transmitted across generations. Another respondent, less enthusiastic about national identification, nevertheless equates "homeland" and Hungary:

I feel [...] that if a football match is going on, or if the national anthem is going on, or if those things are going on, for me, also it's still a good feeling. But let's say I can perfectly imagine myself not spending my life here. [...] [M]e, for example, I don't feel I'm a patriot that much. That those kind of deep things are triggered when I hear that word. But of course, basically, the homeland... I think about Hungary. (9)

When asked to explain what the word "homeland" (*haza*) means for him, another respondent, who is one of the few advocating a supranational Europe, closely equates homeland and nation-state:

The homeland [...] has lost its value, in [...] these circumstances, when lies are the rule. I don't have a homeland. [...] Once I had. Once... It was a different thing when you were

enthusing, when you were happy to belong there. Now... Now we watch them [the government] plunder the country. (8)

Therefore, politics and its consequences (the lies and the corruption associated with *Fidesz*) are considered primarily from the point of view of its effects on the nation-state and on patriotism.

In this regard, the nation-state is the prime location from which the respondents think and discuss politics, and they address the question of political interests mainly from the point of view of national interest. In that sense, national independence is valued by many: “[autonomy] has always been an important question. [...] That is to say, if someone loses its freedom, then he ceases to exist” (23). Consequently, European integration is mostly considered a way to ensure the interests of a country that is too small and fragile to be totally independent: “we are so small, and we would be clumsy without [the EU]. If I saw that it makes no sense anymore because the full thing is falling apart, then... Then I would prefer to be independent” (14). From this point of view, being a member of the EU is a preferable status not in the name of a larger European interest but because it fits, for the moment, national interest. Thus, the collective “we” expressed by the interviewees is primarily a national one.

This closely equates to *Fidesz*’s own political positioning. Despite its ideological transformations, nationalism has always been one of its main features (Szabó 2007) and structures its whole discourse and political agenda. Indeed, nationalism is the key component of the preamble of the *Fundamental Law* enacted by the party in 2010–2011, which Orbán presented as the “identity card of the nation” (Orbán quoted in Stein 2017, 26). Meanwhile, Orbán’s criticisms of liberalism, embodied in the concept of “illiberal democracy”, oppose the individualism of the former to the integration of the individual in the national community, seen as the purpose of the latter (Korkut 2012; Stein 2017). Nationalism is also at the centre of its economic policy, which claims to put “Hungary first” by prioritising national economic interests and is embodied by policies such as the refusal to integrate the Eurozone or to take new loans from the IMF (Kovács 2020; Mihályi 2020; Palonen 2012).

Hungarian Nationalism in Ten Themes

However, a common nationalist perspective on politics does not mean a homogeneous nationalism, quite the contrary. In fact, Hungarian nationalism is characterised by two tendencies. On the one hand, nationalism has occupied a crucial place in Hungarian politics since the 19th century. On the other hand, since the beginning of the 20th century, a minimal consensus regarding a shared conception of the nation has never been reached, contributing to fierce political polarisations that continue to this day (Bibó 1993; Gyurgyák 2007; Szabó 2005). Reflecting this, this research’s interviews and *Fidesz*’s discourse also carry strongly heterogeneous conceptions of the Hungarian nation. They are presented here through ten themes that are organised into three categories: reproduction, shape and character.

Reproduction: The Nation as Given or Chosen

The first four themes describe how the nation is reproduced and the bond uniting individuals and the political community. With identification, the respondents describe the nation as a reference point contributing to defining the individual’s identity. Thus, it is an affective and subjective bond that, as theorised by Brubaker (2001), is not exclusive or permanent. Interviewees can identify with Hungary, Martfű and Europe at the same time, and those identifications can strengthen or weaken through time and circumstances. Indeed, in these quotes, national identification is closely linked to peculiar and subjective moments:

[I]f I sit in front of TV and an Olympic champion gets on the podium, [...] the Hungarian anthem is sung. Then it’s amazing. It’s truly amazing, for Hungarianness (*magyarság*)... (3)

I was in daycare, and on the occasion [of the celebrations] of the Great October Socialist Revolution, [...] we were painting Hungarian national flags. It is my first memory of Hungarianness. (6)

We see here the conjunction between individual identification and some features typical of banal nationalism (the national team and the flag) (Billig 1995). In both quotes, it is the encounter with these features that stimulates an emotional response and temporarily reinforces the identification with nationality (Hungarianness).

With belonging, respondents strengthen the bond between the individual and the nation. Here, affects are still important but are articulated to other signifiers, such as history, roots, and territory:

[A] relationship, an attachment, which comes from the roots, [...], the origins, from... the history of the people [*népcsoport*] of the given country. (17)

[P]atriotism [...] fills me with the past, with attachment, to this earth. [...] Now, those are bonds [*kötelek*] and such a deep attachment for me, “yes, I am Hungarian, here is my homeland”, it fills you with so much warmth, with a pleasant feeling. (27)

The national bond here is more enduring and visceral than what was the case with identification, as the link goes from the individual to the nation but also from the nation to the individual.

If commitment, like identification, describes a bond that is unidirectional (from the individual to the nation), it is more concrete and political, implying a will to be part of or to stand for the political community: “for me, the Hungarian is the one who says he is” (24). Here, commitment means that identification must be stated or performed, not only felt: the nation is thus reproduced by the concrete gestures of individuals. Elsewhere, these gestures have a greater scale and are expressed with civic, economic, cultural or political signifiers: commitment must be demonstrated by the respect of national rules and laws (10), by a concrete contribution to the country’s wealth through work (6), by the adoption of some cultural practices (20), or by the patriotic will to serve his country, regardless of ethnic origins:

[I]n the time of the devastation caused by the Mongolian invasion, maybe the three quarters of the Hungarianness were wiped out. And it was already [ethnically] mixed. And then came the Turk. Then came... What do I know, the Austrian, and the setting up of... The Serbs, of the German... [...] When are we speaking about Hungarians? Of Hungarianness? I know I don’t have a lot of Hungarian blood in my veins. But I am Hungarian, I tell myself Hungarian, I feel Hungarian. And I wanted to do something, and to this day I want to do something for Hungarianness, for Hungarians (13).

Finally, transmission describes an inverse logic, a unidirectional bond from the nation to the individuals, where they receive from the political community a heritage embodied by diverse features: genetics, language, culture, customs, traditions, character traits or a “common temper”:

It’s such a great legacy that someone is Hungarian, talks Hungarian. It’s language. It’s knowledge. (10)

[I]n there, there is also our people... Each of its parts, with the culture, with folk music, with our literature... [...] In short, the nation is all the blood and the sweat shed by our predecessors for this country [...]. (14)

[W]hat is really important for that community is a common temper [*közös lelki alkat*]. [...] Thus, a common temper, a common habitat, a territory is not... not essential but strengthening. But a common temper beyond borders, namely, let’s say, the Hungarians beyond the borders, are also part of the nation. (19)

Here, describing the nation as a “common temper” also serves the purpose of integrating the Hungarians from the neighbouring countries into the nation (see next section).

Reproduction is one of the key aspects on which Hungarian nationalist currents opposed themselves through history (Gyurgyák 2007; Trencsényi 2011). It is also one of the key points on which the traditional categories of ethnic and civic nationalism are differentiated. It effectively refers to crucial questions: is the nation given to its members or chosen by them? Does it exist *per se* or is it actively built over history? On this major issue, *Fidesz* constructed its own heterogeneous conception of the Hungarian nation, where themes such as identification, belonging, commitment and transmission were all represented. In its liberal early stages, Orbán’s party was bearing a conception of the nation centred on identification and commitment, where Hungarianness was determined by individual will (Gyurgyák 2007). With its transformation, in the mid-1990s, into a conservative right-wing party, it integrated the themes of belonging and transmission. For instance, its electoral program for the 1998 election stated that the members of the Hungarian nation are bonded by 1000 years of history and praised “national traditions” (*Fidesz* 2002). More recently, Orbán lauded “the innovative way of thinking” of the Hungarians and their “natural capacity for freedom” (Orbán quoted in Stein 2017, 18), thus constructing what could be described as a common Hungarian “temper”. Nevertheless, identification and commitment are still present in the party’s discourse. Hence, in 2015, László Kövér, speaker of the National Assembly since 2010, stated that Hungarianness is not gained by birth but by one’s “choices, decisions” and the bearing of a “common destiny” with the Hungarian nation (Schiffer and Kövér 2015). *Fidesz* has also articulated the theme of commitment with its neoliberal discourse on economy: according to Orbán, the Hungarian nation is a “community of ‘hard-working’ citizens” (Orbán quoted in Szombati 2018, 165). While excluding from the nation those considered unproductive (nonworkers benefiting from social assistance, a category to which the Roma minority is often associated) (Szombati 2018), this statement also implies that nationality is gained by economic commitment to the country’s wealth.

The combination of these apparently contradictory themes was particularly visible in the composite stance adopted by *Fidesz* in the debate between advocates of a “small” nation (one that does not exceed the borders of the country) and those promoting a “grand” nation (one that includes Hungarian minorities who live abroad). Since the beginning of the postcommunist transition, this debate has contributed to constructing a fierce political frontier between the liberal left and the conservative right (Batory 2010; Macher 2011; Palonen 2018). Hence, when his party won the elections for the first time in 1998, Orbán declared that he wanted to be the prime minister of all Hungarians beyond borders, but solely of those “deserving it” in Hungary itself (Bozóki 2008, 199). This antagonistic synthesis thus reunites two opposing conceptions of the nation, one based on commitment and identification and the other on belonging and transmission. On the one hand, Hungarians from beyond the borders, because they speak the national language (but also because it is taken for granted that they “want” to be Hungarians – a view that is shared by many respondents in the interviews; see next section), are from the outset considered part of the nation. On the other hand, this logic does not apply inside national borders, where only merit establishes national identity. Considering that Orbán elsewhere stated that his party is the sole representative of the Hungarian nation (Szabó 2007), the nature of this merit probably lies in the will to commit to the path outlined by *Fidesz*. The centrality of *Fidesz*’s composite conception of the nation here appears clear: Hungarianness may entail transmission and belonging as well as identification and commitment. This heterogeneous conception can thus appeal to a large portion of the electorate, including its own supporters; among the respondents, *Fidesz* voters carry visions of the nation’s reproduction as heterogeneous as their party’s discourse on that matter.

Shape: The Nation’s Body and Wounds

The next three themes refer to attempts to describe the Hungarian nation from a “physical” perspective. Territory describes the nation through its physical space and borders, including natural

resources (soil, artesian waters) and landscapes. The issue of borders is here inseparable from the memory of the Treaty of Trianon (1921) and its consequences. Following World War I, the treaty led to the loss of 2/3 of Hungary's territory and of 3.5 million of Hungarian speakers (Ferwagner 2015; Molnár 1996). The memory of these events is still very alive in the interviews and is generally considered a collective trauma. The territorial losses are presented as an attempt to amputate the "flesh" of the nation (27) and are directly linked to demographic losses: respondents reported "the feeling that we became fewer" and that "part of the territory was ripped out" (11). Thus, the respondents closely associate the nation's integrity with its territorial integrity, an association already observed by Bibó (1993) in the 1940s.

If the rejection of Trianon is consensual, the interviews show a strong dividing line between advocates of the "grand" and the "small" Hungarian nation, with the majority of respondents (both supporters and opponents of *Fidesz*) identifying with the former. If they do not express a will to reclaim the lost territories, they consider the Hungarian minorities from beyond the borders to be part of the nation. Here again, this equates with Orbán's party's own position on that matter: if Trianon is commemorated with a victimising stance, if the Hungarian minorities from abroad are officially supported by the Hungarian government, *Fidesz* hasn't adopted irredentist claims (Egry 2020). Within this framework, respondents from all the political sides strongly support *Fidesz*'s policy of extending Hungarian citizenship to Hungarian minorities from abroad (adopted in 2010) to recognise that they are members of the nation. The attribution of the right to vote in Hungarian elections (adopted by *Fidesz* in 2013) is, however, far less consensual, some respondents arguing that voting rights should only concern individuals living in the country, while others equate closely citizenship and political participation.

The next theme, uniqueness-fragility, insists on the unique character of the nation and the existential fragility this implies. Uniqueness is first due to Hungarian language and culture:

Well, the Hungarian language is what came to my mind first. Maybe for this reason, if it's allowed to speak that way, we are special. It's unparalleled, and at the moment I heard a lot about the fact that our language also figures out our way of thinking. (4)

Because of their uniqueness, Hungarians are seen as having contributed in a peculiar and innovative way to global culture:

[S]till, the Hungarian (*a magyar*) is a special nation, after all what is used in the whole world, what is surrounding us [...]... There are many things that can be related to us. I think about the ballpoint pen, about the light bulb, about the use of telephone. Accordingly, if Hungary must be described, then first, I'm full of pride that, after all, Hungarians have put a lot of stuff on the table... (23)

However, this uniqueness implies isolation from the rest of the world: "[I]t's a really [...] small, closed country, with its own language that others don't know or can't really learn" (3). Isolation means that the nation is fragile and that it must constantly struggle to survive. Here, immigration sometimes appears to be an existential threat for a fragile nation, eventually meaning the dilution of Hungarian uniqueness: "there will be no more Hungarian people, no more Hungarianness. There will be no more Hungary; Hungary will be a foreign nation" (18).

This can be linked to the heterogeneity/homogeneity dichotomy where respondents' attitudes towards immigration or the Roma minority include a concern for an insufficient degree of homogenisation, which is sometimes expressed in civic terms and other times in cultural terms. Here, concerning immigrants, one respondent considers that homogenisation is a condition for the acquisition of nationality: "the one who becomes integrated and is normal... [N]ever in any way would I say that he is not [Hungarian]" (11). This other respondent excludes the Roma population from the nation because their degree of cultural homogenisation is considered insufficient:

[Except] on holidays and days off, they are not even disposed to join another kind of culture, to join tradition, and because of that I don't consider them to be fully Hungarians. Only in that he is a Hungarian citizen... But no. No. (3)

On the other hand, respondents describe and praise the nation as being, through all its history, ethnically heterogeneous:

[T]he Hungarian nation is also particoloured. [...] I had a friend, he understood my whole thinking on that matter. He always presented himself by: "Hi, my name is K. P. My father is *Sváb* [ethnically German Hungarians], my mother is *Tót* [ethnically Slovak Hungarians], my grandmother was Polish, my [...] great-grandfather Roma... In a word, I am a crystal-clear Hungarian!" (1)

This characterisation, far from being deplored or perceived as a threat, is the subject of pride, as if the Hungarian nation was particular by its capacity to integrate within its uniqueness individuals and groups of diverse origins.

Once again, with his positioning on issues such as immigration and national minorities, the *Fidesz* achieves to incarnate the uniqueness-fragility and heterogeneity/homogeneity themes. For instance, the preamble of the Fundamental Law of 2011 states, "We proclaim that the national minorities living with us form part of the Hungarian political community and are constituent parts of the State³". This ambiguous formulation insists on the heterogeneity/homogeneity dichotomy. On the one hand, it asserts that all national minorities are part of the same "political community". On the other hand, the subject of the sentence is the "we" of the "members of the Hungarian nation", which insinuates a differentiation between a larger and heterogeneous political community and a more substantial and homogenous Hungarian core. Similarly, when opposing the welcoming of refugees, Orbán stated that Hungary's history "is also one of inclusion and the intertwining of cultures" (Orbán quoted by Stein 2017, 24), referring to the nation's heterogeneity. At the same time, Hungary's prime minister insists on Hungary's uniqueness, fragility and homogeneity by describing immigration as a cultural and religious threat to Hungary's integrity (Halmai 2020; Krakovsky 2019). The same way *Fidesz*'s Trianon politics found a middle ground between the rejection of the treaty and the acceptance of a "small" Hungary, this position on immigration allows both to maintain a sentiment of national pride (uniqueness and integrative capacities) and to provide a sense of "protection" against existential threats from the past and from the present.

Character: The Nation's Torments and Strengths

The last three themes insist on some aspects of a "Hungarian national character", as determined by internal and external factors. Unity/division describes a nation constantly torn between a desire for unity and exogenous or endogenous forces dividing it. Exogenous forces refer primarily to major powers that tried or try to break the country's sovereignty and unity in the past (Mongol and Turkish invasions and Austrian and Soviet rule) or present (the EU, China, Russia, and the US) (16-21-9-4). Exogenous forces can also be designated as forces that are inside Hungary, such as the Roma (25) or Jewish minorities (11), and whose presence or behaviour, according to those respondents, undermine the nation. Endogenous forces refer to the intense conflictuality of Hungarian political life or to a "Hungarian character" marked by a "great need for love" (19) (unity) and a conflictual temperament preventing a "true unity" (10) (division). Within this framework, when discussing the role of the state, respondents tend to emphasise national unity, arguing that it should tackle inequalities (21) or, in a more direct manner, that "the principal function of the state is to insure the unity of the state" (20).

In this regard, *Fidesz*'s nationalism, illiberalism and state interventionism respond to the interviewees' care for national unity, even though its social and economic policies in fact increased inequalities⁴ (Ádám and Bozóki 2016; Enyedi 2016; Korkut 2012). Admittedly, *Fidesz*'s radically

antagonistic stance towards its political adversaries (Bozóki 2008; Korkut 2012) does not appeal to many respondents (including supporters of the party), but it is also aligned with their conflictual conception of politics, where “power relations” (6) occupy an important place. At the same time, the “enemies” designated by *Fidesz* over the years globally correspond to the configuration of dividing forces identified in the interviews: refugees, sexual minorities and the Roma minority as exogenous forces from the inside and “Brussels”, George Soros and NGOs as greater powers aiming at subjugating the country.

The East/West theme reproduces another dichotomy structuring the nation’s “character” both from the inside and the outside. It runs through the history of Hungarian nationalism (Hofer 1991; Horel 2021) and characterises the nation as split between two geographical and civilisational identities. The East is associated with oppression and backwardness but also with true national authenticity and roots. In contrast, the West is associated with progress and freedom but also with alienation and rootlessness. Respondents tend to further highlight Hungary’s association with the former, but more often in a devaluing way, arguing that Hungary’s level of administrative, economic and democratic development is insufficient to consider it a Western nation (22-18-1). These comments usually carry a regret: “We would like to be Westerners, I think, but it’s still very hard to leave the East or to get out of it” (14). Following this logic, Hungarian history is interpreted as a long path “towards the West” (26), a path that started with the Christian coronation of King István in the year 1000 but that was frequently hindered by Eastern powers, from Mongolian invasions to Soviet rule. Thus, the postcommunist transition and the European integration also meant that “we entered the club, we are members of the EU, [...] [a]nd I’m confident that from now on we’ll stay here, in the West. And we won’t go back to the East” (7).

However, East and West aren’t always separated. In contrast, the majority of respondents consider Hungary’s identity to be a synthesis of both:

It’s a ferry country (*kompország*). I didn’t invent this, Endre Ady did, and this unfortunate [country] is constantly pushed around between the East and the West. We would like to be part of the West, but we aren’t really part of it, and a good part of our neighbours are today part of the East. [...] For instance, if you consider religion, then in Romania there are already Greek Catholics. In Serbia, Muslims are already there, beside the Orthodox. If we consider it from that perspective, Hungary is completely [...] a frontier-country. (10)

Therefore, a “Central European” identity emerges, “with all its advantages and mainly its disadvantages” (2). A position seen as uncomfortable, because it is squeezed between powerful Eastern and Western neighbours, but a position that the country should use to its advantage: “[We] are right in both [area’s] buffer zone; in a word, we should take what is good from both. And leave the rest” (26).

A link can be made between this Central European identity and the respondents’ attitude towards European integration: in both cases, they insist on the importance of defending national interest and independence while moving closer to the West by being members of the EU *and* maintaining ties with the East. This stance can also be equated with a long-term geopolitical posture of Hungarian leaders going from King István (1000-1038) to János Kádár (1956-1988), which consisted of trying to balance Western and Eastern influences and keeping a certain degree of autonomy (Gradwohl 2007; Molnár 1996; Prigent 2000).

Fidesz follows the same path. Its nationalist discourse mobilises signifiers associated with the West (Christian identity, the Holy Crown of King István), as well as others associated with the East (references to a “Hungarian character”, the Turul Bird as a symbol) (Ádám and Bozóki 2016; Enyedi 2016; Korkut 2012). Concerning foreign affairs, since its return to power in 2010, Orbán’s party has initiated an “opening to the East” to diversify Hungary’s economic partnerships but also to legitimate its political authoritarianism by taking countries such as Russia, Turkey and China as models (Balogh 2015; Halmai 2020). At the same time, if the Hungarian government is maintaining

an oppositional posture towards “Brussels” and supranational conceptions of Europe, thus asserting the country’s independence, it has never seriously questioned Hungary’s membership in NATO or the EU and has presented its anti-immigration policies as a way to safeguard not only Hungary but also the West (Korkut 2012; Kovács 2020; Krakovsky 2019).

On that matter, respondents are divided, some supporting Fidesz’s “opening to the East”, while others reject it, feeling that it is bringing the country backwards. If a few respondents are advocates of a supranational union or, on the contrary, would agree to leave it, most of them prefer, as shown before, an independent Hungary inside the EU. In that sense, Fidesz’s position, halfway between the East and the West and defending a nationalist position inside the EU, is, once again, “central”.

This insurgent stance inside the EU also contributes to incarnating a theme frequently mobilised in the interviews. *Insubordination* describes the Hungarian nation as constantly resisting greater powers that are trying to subdue it. When discussing the country’s history, respondents refer, with pride, to the Hungarian revolutions and liberation struggles. Here, the 1956 Revolution is presented as an act of insubordination providing dignity:

[T]hey didn’t desire only freedom, but [...] to show that we can’t just be crushed like that. And that “it’s OK, [that] tiny country [...], [w]ho cares? Because they don’t have any leverage”. It doesn’t work like that. (14)

Insubordination is also considered a feature of a peculiar Hungarian “character”. According to these interviewees, Hungarians “do not follow rules” (15), and thanks to those qualities, they “still stand here”, despite many exogenous threats over the years (14). Incidentally, as shown earlier, national independence is an ideal widely shared, even if many think about it as unrealistic:

We could also be a country which is not... [...] [L]et’s just say the Hungarian worker was always an assembler for bigger countries. [...] That is to say, the German brings the cars here, or... I don’t know how many countries have [their] stuff made here. But instead, we [should] design and invent new things, and with that we could be successful. (9)

Here, the ideal of independence is expressed through economic terms by opposing it to the logic of neoliberal globalisation.

While the rejection of Hungary’s economic model⁵ can be interpreted as an implicit criticism of Fidesz’s rule on that matter, it should also be specified that this model was in fact shared by all the governments of the postcommunist era (Batory 2002; Wilkin 2018). However, and unlike the liberal left, Orbán’s party has adopted, throughout its history, a political stance relying heavily on the theme of insubordination. First rejecting Soviet rule (Batory 2002), during the 1990s, it turned against, at least rhetorically, globalisation, multinational corporations and “Brussels”, which he associated with the liberal left (Enyedi 2015; Korkut 2012; Kovács 2020; Mihályi 2020). This puts Fidesz’s discourse on fertile ground in regard to this research’s respondents, who, whether they are *Fidesz* or non-*Fidesz* voters, share strong criticisms of globalisation.

In fact, Fidesz’s use of the theme of national insubordination articulates two opposite traditions of Hungarian nationalism: the anti-elitist and elitist traditions (Bibó 1993). Hence, the historical currents of Hungarian nationalism can be divided between those two trends. While prerevolutionary liberal nationalism was dominated by the former, postrevolutionary nationalism was dominated by the latter. Then, during the interwar period, Horthy’s regime, which was a conservative and firmly elitist nationalism, was facing a divided anti-elitist nationalist opposition: ethnic and racial nationalisms, the populist movement and the nationalist tendencies inside the Marxist left⁶ (Gyurgyák 2007; Korkut 2012; Trencsényi 2011).

Fidesz’s own ideological core has been, at least since the mid-1990s, conservative and elitist. While Orbán symbolically excludes the nonworkers from the nation by asserting that Hungary is a “community of ‘hard-working’ citizens” (Szombati 2018, 165), its economic policies aim to

dismantle the welfare state and to develop a “national bourgeoisie”, a process that rapidly took the shape of patronage (Bozóki 2008; Enyedi 2016; Korkut 2012; Kovács 2020; Mihályi 2020). Similarly, during its first term in government (1998–2002), Fidesz’s use of the signifier *polgári*, which means both “bourgeois” and “citizen” and thus has at the same time progressive and conservative connotations, was clearly insisting on the latter, framing a family and work-oriented wealthy middle class as the core of the nation (Bozóki 2008; Fowler 2007). At the same time, as mentioned previously, Orbán’s party has been consistently mobilising the theme of insubordination, sometimes presenting it as an essential trait of a “Hungarian national character”. According to this conception, Hungarians have an “innovative way of thinking”, a “natural capacity for freedom”, and are “by nature politically incorrect”, which makes their liberation struggles “natural” (Orbán quoted in Stein 2017, 18). Fidesz’s constantly challenging posture towards “Brussels” can be inscribed into that framework. Its nationalism is thus able to inscribe itself in the long tradition of Hungarian insubordination and resistance, a tradition highly valued by the respondents, while at the same time serving its elitist political and economical agenda.

These two tendencies are also present among respondents who support Orbán’s party. For instance, in this quotation, a *Fidesz* voter defends the existence of social hierarchies:

[E]veryone has their own place. That we are not necessarily classless, if I can put it that way, but, yes, a hierarchical organisation is needed. [...] Like in the workplace, for example. [...] Between a physician and a bricklayer, a minimal distinction must exist. (14)

In this other quotation, another strong *Fidesz* supporter condemns the Horthy regime for its inegalitarian character, a regime from which Orbán has never distanced himself despite its antisemitism, its alliance with Nazi Germany or its signing of the Trianon Treaty, instead describing its political leaders as “exceptional statesmen” (quoted in Poinssot 2019, 48):

As a matter of fact, the Horthy regime meant that, well, 90% of Hungary was under the rule of landowners. [...] That is the system which comes to my mind. This subjection [...] I have lived in it, I did. My parents, too. (16)

Elsewhere in its interview, this respondent declared that Orbán’s party is “defending the poor Hungarian people” who have been historically subjected to foreign powers. It thus seems that, at least among this research’s respondents, Fidesz’s nationalism appeals as well to anti-elitist *and* elitist political sensibilities, once again illustrating the heterogeneous and “central” nature of this discourse.

Discussion: Nationalism and Hegemony

The centrality of Fidesz’s nationalism relative to the views expressed in the interviews is especially striking considering that a small majority⁷ of the 28 respondents do not electorally support Hungary’s ruling party. At the same time, among these voters as well as those supporting *Fidesz*, heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory conceptions of the Hungarian nation are expressed, which Orbán’s party’s nationalism embodies in their multiplicity. In fact, among the respondents, being a *Fidesz* voter or not seems to have no significant consequences on how Hungarian nationalism is expressed, except on one issue: supranationalism and the relationship to the European Union. Indeed, the respondents (3 of 28) advocating a supranational EU (or the “United States of Europe”) have in common their support for liberal left parties. However, they are heavily outnumbered, even among non-*Fidesz* voters.

Hence, among the respondents, the ruling party’s discourse on the Hungarian nation is shared far beyond its voters. This point is important because it stresses what this article aims to demonstrate: Fidesz’s use of nationalism is to be considered a structural aspect of its political

and cultural struggle for hegemony, as it fits and/or reorganises the contours of common sense to produce consent and a new “normality”, including among its political adversaries⁸. Indeed, Orbán’s party’s discourse not only legitimises the nation-state, uses nationalist signifiers and makes nationalism a central feature of its own political identity: it also frames political issues (economics, European integration, immigration, individual and minority rights, relationship to Hungarian minorities beyond Hungary’s borders, etc.) with a nationalist angle.

Indeed, at least since the 2002 national election, *Fidesz* has been identified as the main representative of Hungarian nationalism against a left-liberal coalition described as alien to national identification and interests (Bozóki 2008; Enyedi 2015; Palonen 2009). In the interviews, the liberal left is generally characterised as alien to nationalism because it “always had concerns with the nation” (19) and is closer to the Western world (21). Furthermore, this respondent noted:

[I]t will be in concrete for 30 years. [...] All those symbols and materials are Fidesz’s. That is... on one hand, [...] they got the homeland, they got the nation. [...] Now, if we look from the other side [*árok*], then I [who votes for the opposition], I’m not Hungarian. What it’s all about [...]; it’s that the people now in power have appropriated those concepts. (10)

This quote equates hegemony with the identification of a particular political force to the nation. According to this respondent, the appropriation of the nation does more than set Fidesz’s political identity; it constructs its power “in concrete”, in the long run.

This supports the theoretical assumption, pointed out by Vucetic and Hopf (2020) (following Gramsci’s reasoning), whereby achieving hegemony on the nation-state level necessitates the “encompassing [of] national identity”, since political and cultural power is “more secure and stable the more deeply the discourse of national identity being propagated by the elite resonates with the masses, still more if it becomes taken for granted in the common sense of the broad population” (Vucetic and Hopf 2020, 1002). In that logic, for a political force aiming at hegemony, to “hegemonize” nationalism is an essential endeavour, as the nation constitutes a deeply sedimented framework in which a whole political project can be inscribed and gain historical and cultural weight, meaning and legitimacy. A ruling discourse may evolve over circumstances, but common sense, while permanently assimilating new elements, remains permeated with signifiers and meanings from the past, feeding the population’s heterogeneous “philosophy” (Gramsci 1983, 89). Hence, a nationalist political force needs to articulate signifiers and meanings that, in common sense, already produce the nation on an everyday basis (Sutherland 2005, 195).

The question which remains is whether this kind of configuration is the sole result of a political force’s intervention directly transforming the common sense, or of its adaptation to something already present in the population. In other words, in this body of interviews, is the centrality of Fidesz’s discourse the consequence of its capacity to articulate its political project to a centuries-old legacy of Hungarian nationalism and to transmit it to the respondents? Or did Orbán’s party simply adapt its discourse to the interviewees’ nationalist common sense inherited from the same centuries-old legacy? That question, which in many ways inserts itself into the debate between “banal” and “everyday” approaches to nationalism (Duchesne 2018; Knott 2015) would deserve a paper-length theoretical discussion. For now, the present research’s results invite us to sketch a middle-ground answer, making those two dimensions entangled by nature – that is, by the nature of hegemony itself. Indeed, hegemony designates a power relation where the interaction between elites’ discourse and the common sense of everyday life is constant. On one hand, political and cultural elites mobilize and adapt signifiers and practices transmitted by school, the media, the arts and social interactions (Horel 2016, 199), but, on the other hand, those are also the object of appropriation by the population (Nagy and Sahin-Tóth 2006), which forces the political and cultural elites to adapt.

As a matter of fact, for *Fidesz*, appropriating Hungarian nationalism and articulating it with his hegemonic project was not a straight path. It resulted from a series of successive additions and shifts,

resorting to multiple historical currents of Hungarian nationalism⁹ and progressively embracing conservative, antiglobalisation, populist or anti-liberal stances. This saw the anti-communist and liberal nationalism of the party's origins mutate into its present heterogeneous form while agglomerating new portions of the electorate (Batory 2002; Enyedi 2015; Fowler 2007; Krakovsky 2019; Palonen 2018). Hence, the history of Fidesz's march to hegemony is also one of constant adaptation.

However, Orbán's party discourse seems to have concrete consequences in the common sense expressed by this research's respondents, as indicated by their relationship to the most "banal" features of Hungarian nationalism. Hungarian national symbols such as the tricolour flag and cockade were adopted during the rise of Hungarian nationalism in the 19th century and were gradually popularized and institutionalized, to the point where, as illustrated previously, these symbols were even mobilized by the socialist regime, contributing to a respondent's identification to Hungarianness (see above). This is a firm example of a nationalist signifier having profoundly permeated the common sense, and being appropriated by the population. For that respondent, in that particular time period, the tricolour flag simply meant "Hungarian nation" or "Hungarianess".

One regime change later, the hegemonization of Hungarian nationalism by *Fidesz* around the 2002 national elections led to a partial displacement of that meaning, as those tricolour symbols gradually became signifiers associated with the political right (Bozóki 2008; Palonen 2009). A respondent, among many others, could thus declare: "[r]ight-wing identity, also, nationality (*nemzetiség*), as when... Who wears a cockade, or who decorates its house with a ribbon with national colours or whom don't. For us, it's a sign [...]" (17). Therefore, these signifiers were the object of a hegemonic intervention aiming to change its signification: in the common sense expressed by the interviewee, tricolour symbols are equated with *Fidesz*, and symbolize right-wing political identity.

However, this result isn't solely the outcome of a political party's intervention. For it to be efficient, the tricolour symbols had to be already deeply integrated in the population's nationalist common sense, which also means their old signification hasn't been totally overwhelmed by the new one. This illustrates the perpetually unstable, heterogeneous and interactional nature of the relationship between hegemony and nationalism expressed by the respondents. Indeed, during the interviews, a long-time supporter of the opposition parties proudly showed the Easter eggs she was decorating with the colours of the Hungarian flag (27).

Conclusion

The interviews conducted in the town of Martfű showed that among the respondents, Fidesz's nationalism occupies a "central" position, both among the ten identified themes defining the Hungarian nation and on current political issues directly involving nationalism. Although their qualitative and localized nature imply that they shouldn't be generalized, these results suggest that more than a feature of its political identity and offer, nationalism is a structural aspect to which Hungary's ruling party articulates its political project in its struggle to achieve hegemony. The logic behind this assumption, based on Gramscian and discourse theory, is that nationalism and national identity are frameworks in which a hegemonic project needs to be inscribed if it wants to succeed on the national level, as they are deeply sedimented in the population's common sense and contribute to defining its vision of the political community. In that sense, a further reflection on the concept of "common sense nationalism" – the part of common sense that relates to the nation and its (re) production – could be a relevant theoretical addition to this research, as this concept could appropriately tackle the relationship between nationalism and hegemony and could insert itself between "banal" and "everyday" perspectives on nationalism.

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Notes

- 1 The respondents occupy the following professions: 6 teachers (2 retired), 1 agronomist (retired), 3 undergraduate students attending university or vocational school, 1 graduate student, 4 employees, 2 workers (1 retired), 1 clergyman, 1 military member, 1 firefighter, 1 computer engineer, 1 librarian, 2 educators, 1 physician, 1 corporate executive, 1 public-sector executive, and 1 cultural-sector executive. Five of the respondents are aged between 18 and 30 years old, 2 between 30 and 40, 2 between 40 and 50, 6 between 50 and 60, 8 between 60 and 70, 3 between 70 and 80, and 2 are more than 80 years old. Respondents are identified by the numbers 1 to 28.
- 2 In the April 2022 general election, in Martfű, *Fidesz* earned 41,25% of the votes, the opposition parties 45,44% and *Mi hazánk*, the newly created far-right party, 7,78%. The results at the national level were respectively 54,13%, 45,44% and 5,88%. As on the national level, support for the ruling party and the far-right increased as support for the opposition decreased, while still staying stronger than the national average.
- 3 Quotes from the Fundamental Law are drawn from its official English translation from Hungarian government's official website: Magyarország Alaptörvénye [The Fundamental Law of Hungary], Alaptörvény. https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/download/a/68/11000/The_Fundamental_Law_of_Hungary_01072016.pdf
- 4 Economic inequalities are a concern for the respondents but is not the object of a real political dichotomy as is the case with other issues (for or against the government, conservatism and liberalism, immigration, etc.).
- 5 Wilkin (2018, 7) describes Hungary as used by Western firms as “a transmission belt into the EU for the production of manufactured goods (cars in particular) and some high-tech goods (particularly computers)” based “upon the fact that labor in Hungary is comparatively cheap, de-politicised, non-unionised and subject to draconian forms of workplace discipline”.
- 6 This taxonomy is taken from the work of historians János Gyurgyák and Balázs Trencsényi.
- 7 Eleven respondents are *Fidesz* voters, 12 support the opposition parties, 3 reject both options and 2 refused to express their preference on this matter. These proportions are close to the electoral results observed in Martfű in April 2022 (see above).
- 8 This characteristic of hegemonic politics can be paralleled with Stuart Hall's analysis of Thatcherism's rise to hegemony in Great Britain, as he noted that over the years, the receptivity and support for Thatcherist ideas grew not only among right-wing voters but also among long-time Labour supporters (Hall 1988).
- 9 *Fidesz*'s nationalism mobilises signifiers from the liberal (both from its elitist and anti-elitist tendencies), conservative, ethnic and populist currents of Hungarian nationalism.

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