

Summary of the dissertation

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THE THEORY OF THE TENSION AMONGST THE TWO ELEMENTS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND ITS MANIFESTATION IN VIKTOR ORBÁN'S SPEECHES

1. The objective of the dissertation

The dissertation builds on the idea that "Democracy and liberalism will remain together as long as it is clear that liberal democracy relies on two elements, that it requires both" (Sartori, 1999:169). However, this notion is no longer evident, liberal democracy has become practically synonymous with democracy. With the end of history the two components have merged, there can only be one kind of democracy, and that is liberal (Fukuyama, 1992). The problem is that liberalism and democracy are not natural allies. Their relationship has never been equal, the distance between them sometimes converges, sometimes diverges. There has been a tension between the concepts from the beginning, since in many respects the two are contradictory. Although an equilibrium between the two elements is theoretically possible, and was achieved for nearly two decades after World War II, the relationship between liberal and democratic elements can be historically characterized as one of alternating imbalances based on political hegemony and the dominant political science paradigm.

Since the turn of the millennium, two major trends have developed worldwide. Politically, the balance between the two elements has been upset, and in an increasing number of countries the discourse on democracy has shifted from the dominance of liberal elements to democratic ones. As a result, mainstream democracy theory has doubled down on the concept of a liberal-dominated democracy paradigm and interprets the political changes as a sign of increasing populism and democratic backsliding (Greskovits, 2015; Plattner, 2015; Mechkova - Lührmann - Lindberg, 2017). Following Viktor Orbán's accession to power in 2010, Hungary has become a textbook example of this political process, especially after his 2014 Baile Tusnad (Tusnádfürdő) speech, in which the Prime Minister introduced the concept of the illiberal state. What political science identified as the rise of populist parties and illiberal leaders was a political response to the changing relationship

between the two elements, which later culminated in the conflict of illiberal democracy vs. liberal democracy. Reflecting on this phenomenon, in face of the democratic backsliding narrative, an alternative approach within the discipline has gained strength in recent years, which focuses on the relationship between the two elements of liberal democracy rather than populism or institutional change. This is what I call democratic tension theory, and my dissertation deals with the emergence of this approach in Hungary. I believe that, although there have been numerous attempts to describe the Orbán regime in recent years (Magyar, 2015; Bozóki-Hegedűs, 2017; Körösenyi, 2019), the study of the internal tensions in the liberalism-democracy relationship has been under-discussed.

In order to show how this approach emerged in Hungary, my dissertation consists of a theoretical and an empirical part. The theoretical part introduces the "classical" or mainstream tension theories that emerge within liberal democracies (illiberalism, populism, hybrid regimes), as well as the emerging alternative tension theory, which is also known as the two distortions of liberal democracy (excessive democracy and undemocratic liberalism). It then points out the role of political science paradigms in shaping democracy and how the relationship between liberalism and democracy has changed since 1990 both internationally and within Hungary. This provides the historical context for the empirical part of my dissertation, which examines, in the context of a case study, how the liberalism-democracy tension appeared in Viktor Orbán's speeches in Baile Tusnad between 2014-2022. I have chosen the 2014 speech as the starting point of the case study because the use of the term *illiberal* can be seen as the first official manifestation of the escalation of the tension between the two elements. I believe that the declaration of the illiberal regime is a turning point in the relationship between the two elements, not only because of the change in international and domestic public opinion, but also because the Prime Minister attempted to "systemize" his earlier references to the relationship between the two elements. Accordingly, I make two claims in my dissertation:

1. A school of thought has emerged within the mainstream democratic theory, which while it cannot be called a separate school, describes the crisis of liberal democracy as a change in the internal tension between the two elements.
2. Viktor Orbán is familiar with the literature of democratic tension theory and integrates it into his "political thinking" adapting it to his political goals.

To test my claims, my case study examines the above-mentioned speeches in terms of their relationship to the two components of liberal democracy. The case study reveals that Viktor Orbán's critique of liberal democracy in his speeches is not illiberal in the classical political science sense of the term, but anti-liberal, that is, it criticizes the liberal predominance of liberal democracy and the elites who represent this approach on a political basis. However, if we look at the more recent interpretations of illiberalism presented in the literature review (Laruelle, 2022), the adjective illiberal may still stand, due to the post-liberal nature of the discourses. The speech analysis also shows that the influence of the literature on democratic tension theory can be detected in the speeches. The approach of the speeches differs from classical tension literature in that in the case of mainstream tension literature, the two elements are never completely opposed to each other; academic literature draws attention to the shift in proportions and the distortions that arise from this (illiberalism/ excessive democracy and undemocratic liberalism), but does not seek to eliminate the dominance of one element and replace it with the other, rather it calls for a fine-tuning of their balance. Instead of correction, Viktor Orbán is proposing an elite and system change, which ultimately stems from the fact that, as a politician, he is by definition offering a political response, not a theoretical one. In this respect, I believe that Hungarian political science has a task to address not only the illiberal bias, but also its counterpart.

2. Structure of the dissertation

Following the introduction, I will present the literature relevant to the research (Chapter 2) and the criteria based upon which it was selected (2.1). The literature review is divided into two categories, the first one presenting the different narratives of the general interpretation of the challenge to liberal democracy (2.2), the literature on illiberalism, populism and hybrid regime theory. In the second category, I present the alternative tension theories (2.3). In this section, I summarize the literature on the shifting balance between the two elements, that is, the theories of excessive democracy and undemocratic liberalism. Building on the literature review, in the chapter on the changing relations between liberalism and democracy on the international level (Chapter 3), I first discuss the democracy-shaping impact of the transitology paradigm and the end of history theory (3.1), i.e., that the transformation of the geopolitical balance of power (3.2) left liberal democracy without an ideological counterpart (3.3), thus sharpening tensions *within* liberal democracy. In the concluding part of the chapter, I show how the escalation of the internal tensions of liberal democracy has led to the return of history (3.4). In Chapter 4, I present the context of the escalation

of liberal-democratic tensions in Hungary, including Fidesz's early democracy critique (4.1) and the triggers of its post-2002 attempt at systemic transformation (4.2). After presenting this developmental process, I turn to the empirical part of my dissertation, the case study of Viktor Orbán's speeches in Baile Tusnad (Chapter 5). I examine the emergence of two components of liberal democracy in the speeches and the way in which the speeches relate to alternative theories presented in the literature. As a concluding part of the Hungarian example, I summarize the goals and perspectives that emerge from the speeches (5.3), which I then place in the general theory of the tension between liberal and democratic elements (Chapter 6).

3. Summary of the methodology

My research is based on a qualitative methodology, using secondary literature analysis and content analysis of political speeches. It takes a realist, analytical approach that seeks to understand the existing world of politics (Köröseyi, 2019). This is why I examine how politics reflects on paradigms of democratic theory.

The aim of the secondary literature review, which contributes to the theoretical underpinning, is to show that fundamental conceptual issues are interpreted quite differently by proponents of liberal democracy and those who favor the dominance of democratic elements over liberal ones. This contributes greatly to the emergence of different interpretations of democracy and to the failure of the two sides to reach a consensus on the ideal definition of democracy.

The literature relevant to this research is divided into two categories. The literature dealing with the challenges to liberal democracies (illiberalism, populism, hybrid regimes) and the independent, alternative theories of tension within liberal democracies. With regard to the first category, it is important to note that, for reasons of scope, the literature review does not examine the complete literature on democratic theory from the regime changes in Eastern Europe to the present. Instead, I have grouped the literature in a way that reflects the different sources of conflict that political science has identified as dangerous for democracy in a given period. This grouping is based on the premise that there have always been concerns about the survival of democracies since the democratic transitions of the 1990s. It was not evident that the new democracies would consolidate. But as time has passed, political science has identified new challenges. Rather than tracing the emergence, key authors and content of the different schools and paradigms in a linear fashion, I will

focus on three main ‘hotspots’, the problem of illiberalism, populism and hybrid regimes. The three problems are far from identical, if we take just illiberalism and populism, for example, their meanings have changed considerably over time. The literature review in this respect also shows that conceptual interpretations change as researchers gain more experience with a phenomenon. This contributes to understanding the role of the dominant political science paradigms in shaping democracy and to illustrating how the relationship between liberalism and democracy has changed since 1990.

My case study uses the Hungarian example to examine the escalation of the liberal-democratic tension by analyzing the speeches of Viktor Orbán. In the analysis, I examine the speeches of Viktor Orbán at the Bálványos Summer Free University from 2014 to 2022. (Also known as the Baile Tusnad speeches). Since the speeches deal with the state of liberal democracy in a recurrent way, I argue that they are suitable for examining the emergence of alternative tension theory. It is also important, that since Viktor Orbán has been uninterrupted in governing since 2010, this continuity gives the speeches a certain coherence. Although the content of the speeches is influenced by the election campaigns and the outcome of the elections, the situation produces structurally similar, “predictable” speeches, which makes them more suitable than any other regularly held speeches for the verification of my claims. The fact that the case study focuses exclusively on Viktor Orbán's speeches and the Hungarian example, rather than an international comparative analysis, is justified by the fact that Viktor Orbán is considered the only political leader for whom illiberal politics is associated with thinking about the nature of democracy.

In the case study, I analyzed only written transcripts of official speeches, partly to limit the scope of the case study and partly to search for “conscious”, strategically thought-out messages that serve as a reflection on political theory. Using content analysis, I identified the main messages of the speech and whether the issues under investigation apply to the speech in question, i.e. whether and how the terms liberalism or democracy are included. Since politicians act through their speech as well, their meaning and stakes can be read from the text of the speeches (Szabó, 2016). Therefore, based on the patterns found in the speeches, in the last subchapter of the case study, I summarize the goals and perspectives emerging from the speeches.

4. Findings of the dissertation

The key findings of my dissertation are:

1. My research has demonstrated the presence of alternative-tension theories in the discourse of democracy theory. A review of the secondary literature has shown that the roots of alternative tension theories – excessive democracy and undemocratic liberalism – are common, a reaction to the dominance of the liberal element in liberal democracy. However, the responses to this phenomenon are very different, pointing to the many ways in which the democratic deficit can manifest itself (e.g. illiberalism and non-democratic liberalism). While alternative tension theories overlap in many respects with the manifestations of tensions within liberal democracy (illiberalism, populism, hybrid regimes), they allow for a more sensitive analysis, reflecting the tension between the two elements of liberal democracy, whereas “traditional” analyses can only register the opposition to liberal democracy, but do not go deeper into the phenomenon. Because (liberal) democracy is identified with liberalism, with the liberal element, they cannot deal with the critical role of the democratic element, they see it as a negative, harmful intention, not as a reflective, corrective attempt.
2. The examination of the changing relationship between liberalism and democracy, linked to the secondary literature review, showed that the escalation of internal tensions within liberal democracy is not only a consequence of changing paradigms in democratic theory, but that academic paradigms also affect politics. Thus, different notions of democracy are clashing within the currently dominant paradigm, a debate that is spilling over into the political arena.
3. The case study confirmed the second claim of my dissertation, that Viktor Orbán is familiar with the literature of democratic tension theory and integrates it into his “political thinking”, adapting it for his political purposes. This is exemplified by the inclusion of the term non-democratic liberalism in his discussion of the current state of liberal democracy, which goes beyond a critique of liberalism and taps into an existing political science discourse.
4. Based on the case study's speech analysis, the theoretical underpinnings of the liberal and democratic element were more in the forefront when the environmental conditions were favorable to Fidesz or when the party felt its position was stable, and occasionally when it needed to mobilize before an upcoming election, and were pushed to the background when (international) conflicts became more acute or the party's position felt less stable. From the

speeches studied, it is clear that Viktor Orbán saw the sustainability of power politics in securing the triad of “money, ideology, and votes”. It can be seen from the case study that the “ideological” element was reinforced when the other two elements were taken for granted by the Fidesz political community.

5. Despite the pragmatism of the speeches, Viktor Orbán's attitude towards liberalism/liberal democracy is consistent throughout the speeches.
6. The case study shows that Viktor Orbán's critique of liberal democracy in his speeches is not illiberal in the classical political science sense of the term, but anti-liberal, i.e. it criticizes the liberal predominance of liberal democracy and the elites who represent this approach on a political basis.
7. If we look at the more recent interpretations of illiberalism, the adjective illiberal may still stand, due to the post-liberal nature of the speeches. However, it is important to complement this with the literature review's finding that the definition and perception of illiberal democracy has changed over time. On the one hand, it has partly moved away from the original classical understanding, on the other hand it has become more inclusive and permissive. The new trends are more sensitive to the reflexive, critical nature of illiberalism, and do not automatically push the critique of liberalism into a populist, authoritarian interpretative framework. In this sense, the recurring critique of cultural, geopolitical and colonial liberalism in the speeches fits into the new interpretative framework of illiberalism.
8. While in his speeches Viktor Orbán tries to give a theoretical grounding to illiberal democracy, he refers to his alternative interpretation sometimes as a system of power politics, sometimes as an era, sometimes as a model of state theory or political theory, and sometimes – though not explicitly stated – as a counter-ideology. This reflects the fact that, although the process of constructing an alternative theoretical grounding is a conscious one, it is nevertheless a process of political-ideological path-finding. In addition to the mixed use of terms for illiberalism, the speeches oscillate between the use of the terms liberalism, illiberal democracy, etc. in a political or political science sense, according to the purpose of the speech.
9. Out of the liberal and democratic elements, the critique of the liberal element is much stronger. While it is clear from the speeches that they seek to shift the balance between the two elements

towards the democratic direction, they fail to delineate what a more “democratic”, i.e. less liberal, democracy would look like. In most cases, the democratic element is identified with the values of Christian democracy, or is presented as the opposite of liberal values and policies. While the development of the concept of illiberal democracy can be clearly traced over the years, it is also clear that the definition of the other element is far from complete.

10. The approach of the speeches differs from classical tension literature in that in the case of mainstream tension literature, the two elements are never completely opposed to each other; academic literature draws attention to the shift in proportions and the distortions that arise from this (illiberalism/excessive democracy and undemocratic liberalism), but does not seek to eliminate the dominance of one element and replace it with the other, rather it calls for a fine-tuning of their balance. Instead of correction, Viktor Orbán is proposing an elite and system change, which ultimately stems from the fact that, as a politician, he is by definition offering a political response, not a theoretical one.

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6. Conference presentations and publications related to the dissertation

Conferences

- ELTE ÁJK Conference on Legal and Political Theory 2024: Postliberal illiberalism?
- ELTE ÁJK Conference on Legal and Political Theory 2024: Party dominance outside of Europe: the Japanese model.
- Annual Conference of the Hungarian Political Science Association 2023: War and peace in the shadow of the Hungarian democracy debate.
- Annual Conference of the Hungarian Political Science Association 2022: Can the political system be changed? Plebiscitary democracy and Donald Trump.
- Annual Conference of the Hungarian Political Science Association 2021: The logic of Viktor Orbán's conflict management.
- Annual Conference of the Hungarian Political Science Association 2019: Rethinking the tradition of 1968 in American conservative theories.
- Political Science PhD Student's Conference 2018: A differentiated definition of democracy. Towards a more precise understanding?

Publications

- Csizmadia Ervin; Lakatos Júlia; Novák Zoltán, Rajnai Gergely; Zsolt Péter (2024): *Kormányzásra várva. A magyar ellenzék nemzetközi és történeti összehasonlításban*. Gondolat kiadó, Méltányosság Politikaelemző Központ.
- Lakatos Júlia (2022): A '68-as hagyomány és konzervatív ellenkultúra. In: *Társadalmi mozgalmak, civil társadalom, emberi jogok. Ünnepi kötet Szabó Máté 65. születésnapjára*. ELTE Eötvös Kiadó.
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