

An Illiberal **Love** Affair

An Analysis of Viktor Orbán's Ideational Shift: From Liberal Democracy
to Illiberalism and Authoritarian Alignment with Russia (2010-2022)



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Abstract

This thesis investigates the ideological collaboration between Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Russian president Vladimir Putin in relation to democratic backsliding in Hungary between 2010 and 2022. Drawing on theories of democratic backsliding, autocracy promotion, and authoritarian collaboration, the study analyses and discusses a selection of speeches and press conferences to identify ideological shifts and patterns of mutual reinforcement between the two leaders. Using a qualitative idea and ideology analysis, the study finds that Orbán's rhetoric gradually evolved from subtle critiques of liberal democracy to overt support for illiberal and authoritarian governance. Simultaneously, Hungary's relationship with Russia deepened across economic, cultural and ideological domains. The thesis argues that this collaboration is not incidental but part of a broader authoritarian logic in which both actors gain legitimacy and strategic advantages. The findings contribute to understanding how smaller states like Hungary can play an active role in promoting illiberalism and challenge the resilience of democratic norms within the European Union.

Key words: *democratic backsliding, autocracy promotion, authoritarian collaboration, Hungary, Viktor Orbán, Russia, idea and ideology analysis*

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1 Introduction

“Thirty years ago we thought that Europe was our future; today we think that we are Europe’s future. Let us feel the weight of our responsibility” Viktor Orbán states in his speech after winning his fifth victory in Hungary’s parliamentary elections in 2022 (Speech Given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán After Swearing His Prime Ministerial Oath, 2022). In 2024 the European Parliament wrote an explanatory statement for their report sounding the alarm on democratic backsliding in Europe, where Hungary is explicitly mentioned. The values of the Union, such as democracy, are not something to be taken for granted (European Parliament, 2024).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 there was a consensus within the western world that democracy had won. Authoritarian governments were falling one after another while democratic institutions were being implemented at a high speed. Threatening ideologies such as fascism and communism were no longer a substantial threat and people could dare to believe in a brighter and more secure tomorrow. This consensus however, has since had its peak and been on an unsteady decline where big shouts of warnings are a reality. Democratic backsliding has become a fundamental theory to understand why the political sphere is going in the “wrong” direction (Lindberg, 2018). It is not reasonable to assume that the fight against authoritarianism is over because there have been three substantial waves of democratisation or because totalitarianism was defeated in the 20th century which led to laws protecting human rights being passed. All of the democratic virtues, such as human rights and freedom require constant democratic actions from all of society. Leaving democracy to stand by itself in apathy and assuming the process is done is what gives way to destabilising the institutions we value the most (Almagro, 2019:3).

1.1 Aim and Research Question

The main aim of this paper is to understand how the collaboration between Hungary and Russia, more specifically Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin has interacted and/or interfaced with the democratic backsliding in Hungary between the years 2010-2022. This paper answers this question by conducting a qualitative idea and ideology analysis.

To ensure peace and prosperity a failsafe is built into the EU where member states are required to maintain democracy, defending human rights, protection of minorities and no less a democratic rule of law. When Hungary was accepted into the union in 2004 they met all of the above stated qualifications. However the country has since then undergone a transition and is classified a hybrid democratic-autocratic regime (Henault, 2022). In 2022 the EU even officially declared that they could no longer be seen as a full democracy, and instead should be classified as an electoral autocracy. Although elections are still held in Hungary, many of the representative democratic values in these elections are consequently undermined. Same goes for other democratic institutions that have been purposefully eroded (Henault, 2022).

When Viktor Orbán and his political party Fidesz won the election and rose to power a second time in 2010 the autocratisation of Hungary became almost a game plan. Public institutions were being deliberately dismantled, minority rights became threatened and have continued to be attacked, an aggressive nationalist rhetoric is cemented and the democratic rule of law is under constant intrusion (Benson, 2022).

While this continuous attack on democracy has taken place, the country's relations with other authoritarian regimes has continued to grow. One that is of particular interest is Russia and its continued influence on European countries. The friendship between the two country's leaders, Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin, has not gone unnoticed and is a solidification between two nationalistic men who quite openly despise Western liberalism and have therefore reshaped their political systems accordingly. There is a clear and deep relationship between Orbán's government and Moscow, and this presents an interesting inquiry (Zgut-Przybylska, 2024).

Given the above, this paper's research question can be put as follows:

How has the (ideological) collaboration between Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin interfaced with the democratic backsliding in Hungary between 2010-2022?

1.2 Delimitations

This study has established a few delimitations to maintain focus and utility when answering our research question. Firstly, the time span is set from 2010-2022, which follows Viktor Orbán's consecutive parliamentary election victories, up until the most recent one. The timespan also ensures a long enough timeframe to uncover ideational developments, and enables us to execute our analysis in a satisfactory fashion. The analysis is limited to public records of speeches posted by the respective governments in question, and were chosen based on their ideological relevance, availability, and significance in illustrating ideational shifts. Other forms of political communication, such as interviews, policy documents, or social media content, are not included, although they may have provided additional nuance to the ideological trajectory explored.

Secondly, the focus is placed exclusively on the discursive dimension of Orbán's political leadership, specifically through his rhetoric expressed in speeches. While some institutional and legal developments are referenced, e.g. constitutional changes and legislative acts, these are discussed primarily in support of ideational trends rather than as objects of detailed institutional analysis.

Thirdly, the study uses a qualitative and interpretive approach to uncover ideological developments and patterns of democratic backsliding, autocracy promotion, and authoritarian collaboration. Quantitative indicators of democracy, e.g. Freedom House scores or V-Dem indices, are not incorporated, as the aim is not to measure backsliding numerically, but to explore how it is articulated discursively.

Lastly, while the role of Russia is explored, the analysis does not attempt to comprehensively assess Russia's broader foreign policy or its autocracy promotion efforts in other states, such as Bulgaria. Nor does it seek to make conclusive claims about intentionality, but rather uses theoretical frameworks (Tansey, 2016; Cottiero & Emmons, 2024) to interpret possible motives and patterns of collaboration. These limits ensure feasibility while cultivating alignment with our chosen theoretical framework.

1.3 Disposition

The thesis is structured into nine sections. The background is provided to give context for the analysis and discussion, and it contains Orbán's rise to power, the classification of Hungary as a non-democratic state and the relation between Russia and the EU. Following the background comes the theoretical framework, consisting of democratic backsliding, autocracy promotion and authoritarian collaboration, which are used in the discussion. Next is the methodology chapter, where the idea and ideology method is introduced and operationalised, as well as the material chosen for the analysis. From there the analysis presents the findings of the study, and follows the chronological order of the chosen material. After the analysis the findings are discussed in the discussion, where the theories are used to provide insight. Lastly there is a conclusion of the study, summarising the study, relating it to present research, with a list of all references at the end.

1.4 Literature review

Previous research on the topic has focused mainly on Russia, how they have influenced other states and their relationship with the European Union (EU). This entails the tug of war that has targeted Eastern and Central Europe for the past decades and how countries, such as Hungary, have become a pawn for Russia in the battle against the EU. This conflict has also become a struggle of ideologies, which is somewhat discussed in the literature. Research has also focused on how there has been great interest for larger authoritarian states, like Russia, to spread autocratic ideologies in means of self interest and self serving purposes (Conley, Stefanov, Mina & Vladimirov, 2016; Conley, Stefanov, Mina & Vladimirov, 2016; Végh, 2015; Liik, 2018). Another part of the contemporary research has focused on how backsliding in Hungary has developed, which is also examined in this paper.

However the research has not put adequate effort into understanding what smaller states, such as Hungary, have to gain from relationships with bigger states from an ideational standpoint. Countries such as Hungary are not simply being used by bigger nations such as Russia, they are in a symbiotic relationship helping each other and promoting their autocracy and backsliding together (Shein et al, 2023; Carothers & Press, 2022, Végh, 2016). The gap in the research, which this study aims to fill, is the role that smaller states such as Hungary have in democratic backsliding and joint autocratic collaboration. As we will discover in the analysis and the discussion Hungary has had an

active role in welcoming autocratic promotion and has a lot to gain from authoritarian collaboration. There is also a lack in understanding the ideological exchange between the two non-democratic states can provide for each other, such as Russia and Hungary. To summarise there is indeed a lot of research on the topic, however where it lacks is tying it all together.

2 Background

In this chapter I will present a brief background of the Hungarian socio-political environment to better help understand the context of the aim. This includes Viktor Orbán's rise to power and his history with Fidesz, the classification of Hungary as an illiberal democracy and an overview of the relation between the European Union and Russia.

2.1 Viktor Orbán and Fidesz

Fidesz is the ruling centre-right party in Hungary headed by Viktor Orbán. It was founded 1988 as an anticommunist political party that promoted European integration and the development of a market economy. The party was first named The Federation of Young Democrats, and has had a few name changes since then, today it is known as Fidesz. 1990 was the first year of any notable success in a few cities around Hungary, but the first major win came in 1997 when the party, together with a Christian Democratic Group, won 148 seats in the National Assembly and could form a coalition government with two other parties. The party's platform was centered around pursuing membership in the European Union and cutting taxes and social insurance fees. In the 2002 elections the party lost their majority (Wallenfeldt, 2025).

The second time the party and Orbán came to power was in 2010. Orbán successfully capitalised on the crises that Hungary was facing from the 2008 economic collapse and other accompanying long-term difficulties. He and his party won the election with over two-thirds of the seats gaining a supermajority, together with the Christian Democratic People's Party. Orbán immediately began pushing through a series of legislative measures that resulted in a new constitution which embodied conservative religious and moral themes. This new constitution elicited large domestic and international response, which made Orbán scale back on a few laws, for example a proposed media law that would have given him and his party compelling control. The backlash did not majorly hinder Orbán, however, as he continued to push for new legislative measures (Grant, 2025).

The 2014 election did also comprise a win for the party and Orbán was once again elected prime minister. Accompanying the rising popularity were also accusations of authoritarianism and corruption from the opposition. Orbán's government denied these claims, meanwhile they

introduced a new tax targeting media freedom and carrying out surprise inspections on NGOs castigating civil society. In 2014, Orbán also stated that he was aiming to build a society that is “illiberal” in nature, naming Turkey, China and Russia as examples. This, again, prompted a strong reaction from the opposition and foreign press. After this many statements with strong reactions followed; in 2016 about the immigration crisis, in 2018 about nationalism, anti-muslim rhetoric, and so forth (Grant, 2025).

2018 marked the year of Orbán winning his fourth election. Up until this point, Orbán's autocratic rule and seizing of power had gone quite unopposed and not met with much backlash. However he started having problems with the European People's Party (EPP) within the European Parliament and his growing relationship with Russia's president Vladimir Putin was not quite popular among his EPP colleagues. The same year Article 7¹ was invoked, launching actions that could suspend Hungary's voting rights in the European Council and possible sanctions against the country. This was however painted as a ‘revenge act’ against Hungary for continuing their anti-immigration rhetoric. The proceedings of Article 7 were never finished (Grant, 2025).

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020 the Hungarian Parliament passed a bill that allowed Orbán to rule by decree, supposedly granting him emergency power to better confront the crisis. This law meant that elections were temporarily suspended and Orbán issued mandated penalties for spreading of what is phrased as false news. In 2021 a rigorous anti-LGBTQ legislation was put into place. In 2022 Fidesz once again won the election and claimed a landslide victory. Critics believe that the victory was inevitably given by the government's media monopoly and gerrymandering, all the while his cordial relationship with Putin has continued flourishing (Grant, 2025).

2.2 The classification of Hungary as an illiberal democracy

Since being accepted into the European Union in 2004, Hungary has undergone a transition from being a full democracy to a hybrid democratic-autocratic regime, i.e. an electoral autocracy or illiberal democracy. This entails that the country has backslid. Although elections are still being held, representative democratic values are being greatly undermined. Soon after Fidesz won the

¹ Article 7, also called “The Nuclear Option”, is an article of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) that allows the EU to deal with severe breaches of its founding values, such as democracy (European Council, 2025)

election in 2010 evidence of deliberate corruption of the electoral system was found, marking the start of the transition. Since then workfare programs that many voters rely on have been implemented that are contingent on political support, stripping the voters of political autonomy. This has been pointed as one of the major factors for Fidesz and Orbán winning the elections in both 2014 and 2018, while simultaneously controlling the local mayors who are in charge of implementing the program. As mentioned, the electoral fraud is the most compelling evidence of Hungary no longer being considered a democracy. The breakdown of said electoral system is one of the biggest concerns, which has also enabled the Hungarian government to transform from a democracy to a hybrid democratic-autocracy. The root cause of this has been assumed to be the disintegration of the electoral system (Henault, 2022). The theory of democratic backsliding will be further explained in the theoretical framework.

2.3 Russia and The European Union

For the most part, Russia and the EU have had a strategic partnership extending to many different areas of cooperation, such as the economy, energy, research, trade, education, security, culture etc. The EU was supportive of Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation² (WTO), however since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea the relationship grew incredibly tense. It did not help that there was staunch evidence of Russia disrupting access to the Sea of Azov³ and supporting separatist fighters in eastern Ukraine. The results were major reviews of EU policy towards Russia and several sanctions being implemented. As a response, Russia implemented counter-sanctions which banned numerous EU agri-food products. In spite of the sanctions the EU continued to be Russia's biggest trading partner (Cuevas Herman, 2024).

In 2016, continued strategic parting efforts were made from the EU, by implementing guiding principles that were to be applied to any further relations between Russia and EU countries. The goal being to strengthen the overall resilience of the EU in regards to energy security, strategic communication and hybrid threats. This strategy continued until 24th February 2022 when Russia launched its full scale attack on Ukraine, which led to the EU suspending all political, cultural and

² The World Trade Organisation is the only international collaborative organisation that deals with the rules of trade between nations (WTO, 2025).

³ Sea of Azov is situated off the southern shores of Russia and Ukraine, which holds the Crimean peninsula (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998a)

scientific collaborations with the former. This attack led to further principles, such as isolating Russia internationally and further sanctions imposed to prevent war, holding Russia accountable, supporting the EU's neighbours, keeping close cooperation with NATO, again enhancing the EU's resilience. In particular regarding critical infrastructure and energy security, and lastly human rights defenders, civil society and independent media must be supported, both inside and outside Russia.

Since 2022, the EU has called an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Russian military troops from the entire Ukrainian territory, which has yet to happen.. The EU does not recognise Russia to be a democracy and characterises it as an 'authoritarian regime' according to the EIU Democracy Index 2023⁴. To say that the relations between the EU and Russia are bad is an understatement (Cuevas Herman, 2024).

⁴ The EIU Democracy Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit Index measures the state of democracy across 167 countries and territories assessing electoral processes, political participation, governance, political culture and civil liberties (EIU, 2025).

3 Theoretical Framework

To help analyse and understand the role Russia has had, and to what extent they have been complicit in the democratic backsliding in Hungary, three theories will be used. The first is *democratic backsliding*. This will give context to exactly what kind of democratic backsliding Hungary has experienced and how it may be explained. The second theory is *autocratic promotion*. As democratic backsliding is a theory that is explanatory from within a country a complementing theory must be used to explain how an outside force, such as Russia, may have had influence. The third theory is *authoritarian collaboration*. Much of the democratic backsliding in Hungary has been a conscious choice on their part, a third bridging theory is needed. Together these three theories provide a satisfactory analytical tool to help answer our research question.

3.1 Democratic backsliding

There are substantial variations in democratic backsliding, and it is best understood through a primary focus on domestic political actors being the driving force. The term “democratic backsliding” can be understood as the systematic dismantling of democratic norms and institutions (Carothers & Press, 2022:11). The most common and concise definition of democratic backsliding is the “state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” (Shein et al, 2023). It is important to note the “state-led” sequence, as democratic backsliding is pursued from within the countries in question. It is a deliberate hollowing out of known democratic institutions, practices, processes and norms. Democratic backsliding can also take on many different forms, and should not be viewed as a “one size, fits all”. Democratic backsliding will below be referred to simply as backsliding (Shein et al, 2023).

As mentioned above there are several *types* of backsliding. Bermeo provides six distinctions, firstly three of a somewhat bygone era, and then another three adapted to what we are currently facing. Today, more hard to define types of backsliding have emerged, which makes them much harder to both call out and to take action against. Here we can categorise *promissory coups*, i.e. a coup framed as temporary for the sake of democratic stability and on a promise of holding elections soon, *executive aggrandisement*, and *strategic manipulation of elections* (Bermeo, 2016). We will be focusing on the latter two as they are applicable to Hungary.

Executive aggrandisement is one of the more common types of backsliding, and encompasses that institutional change has been legally decreed by a freely elected official, entailing that resulting changes can be understood as the result of a democratic mandate. It is characterised by being a slow process and there is no coup making involved. Executive aggrandisement is when a democratically elected executive systematically makes institutional changes in order to weaken the checks of power towards them. Oftentimes using their newly elected constitutional assemblies and sometimes even existing legislatures or courts to intentionally disassemble democratic institutions that might pose a threat or challenge said executive (Bermeo, 2016).

Strategic manipulation of elections, which is the second definition provided by Bermeo, is often practiced in accordance with executive aggrandisement. Manipulating elections strategically as a form of backsliding contains multiple actions which are meant to wield the electoral playing field in favour of the occupants. These actions may consist of using government funds for incumbent campaigns, hampering media access and voter registration, keeping opposition candidates off the ballot, packing electoral commissions, harassing opponents and changing electoral rules. However these actions are carefully administered in a way that keeps the election itself seemingly democratic. This form of backsliding is also administered at a slow pace and put in action long before the actual election, all done not to raise any alarms. This makes it a lot harder for international, and sometimes domestic, observers to objectively critique the backsliding (Bermeo, 2016).

Another definition of backsliding that can be applied to Hungary is provided by Charothers and Press who define it as *grievance fuelled illiberalism*. They explain that some leaders take advantage of a general frustration to then justify dismantling an existing set of democratic institutions and norms, which they also blame for having created the cause of the grievance. What type of grievance varies greatly, e.g. public frustration over corruption, religious marginalisation or dire economic conditions. A political executive will then politicise this grievance and gain major support, uniting behind the issue. After that the grievance is inevitably linked to democratic norms and institutions. The key in this kind of backsliding is an electoral victory, which enables the political executive to then carry out a confrontation of said democratic norms and institutions, often very quickly after a victorious election. Although grievance fuelled illiberalism is driven by political leaders, it often generates significant public support. For the sake of having their grievances justified, some are willing to tolerate a degree of democratic loss (Charothers & Press, 2022:12-13). Both Bermeo's

and Charothers' & Press' definitions of backsliding are needed to fully contextualise the reality of Hungary's situation.

3.2 Autocracy Promotion

Autocracy promotion is a rather new theory that has been developed concurrently with democracy promotion. This paper will use the definition provided by Tansey (2016) to complement the two other theories and discuss the chosen material. It is important to note that not all international politics that are applied by autocratic regimes can be counted as autocracy promotion. Tansey builds his definition of the concept on four considerations: agency, intention, motivation and effects. The last one Tansey rejects, as it is a passive and accidental form of autocracy promotion, therefore we will not be using it either (Tansey, 2016:146-147:151).

The presence of agency

Autocracy promotion requires the presence of agency. There needs to be a conscious effort towards an autocratic goal, a promoter operating with intent. It is a foreign policy which is pursued by external actors, most often states, acting with intent (Tansey, 2016:147).

The role of intentions

Intentions help sort which policies could be classified as autocracy promotion, as not all international policies issued by the states have the intent to promote autocracy. The ones that do have intention to promote transition or consolidation of an autocratic regime can then be assorted to the concept. Such policies may consist of electoral misconduct, support of military strategies, or economic support. However, policies can be misclassified, and therefore one must seriously consider which external policies can be accounted for autocracy promotion, and which ones have other ambitions (Tansey, 2016:148).

Tansey attests that there are a number of indicators that can be used in identifying the intentions of actors. The first is looking at statements of the actors who are potentially seeking to influence domestic politics abroad. The objectives might sometimes be concealed but statements of intervening countries may be of enough assistance. The second is observing external actors' actions, rather than outright statements, and particularly the policies they prosecute at domestic levels.

Domestic actors can gain and stay in power by adopting authoritarian practices, such as violent repression, coups and election fraud. When external actors aid domestic actors in these actions it can indicate a wish to endorse or assist autocratic actors abroad. The third is looking at the timing of certain events, i.e. a seemingly innocent economic aid may be suspicious in timing and in support of a newly elected authoritarian government (Tansey, 2016:148-149).

The underlying motives

Motives are closely related to intentions, however there is a very important differentiation to make. The intentions regard the purpose of the policy, while the underlying motives are behind the intentions. By definition autocracy promotion is intended to promote autocratic rule as a form of government and the motives behind that can vary to many degrees, they can be ideological or strategic, self-interested or altruistic (Tansey, 2016:149).

Tansey argues that all definitions of autocracy promotion must consider the motives behind and presents three motives. The first two are instrumental. The very first motive entails that transitions to democracy may have a domino effect and therefore threatens the autocratic state in question, as they do not want to invoke democratic forces domestically. Therefore it is in their self-interest to protect other autocratic states from this transitioning. The second motivation concerns instrumental considerations about aligning policies. There is a wish from powerful states to protect authoritarian regimes abroad to ensure compliant and supportive allies, and also having them remain in power. This is meant to create a network of support and is paramount when there is division between popular opinion and government. This is a strategic motivation in terms of economic interest and national security. The third motivation may be described as true autocracy promotion, as it can drive external actors to aid and support autocratic elites abroad, more precisely authoritarianism as a form of regime. It is ideologically driven, as in there is a clear commitment to promoting the ideological aspect of autocracy (Tansey, 2016:150).

1. Are external actors intentionally seeking to shape domestic politics?
Yes → Active influences No → Passive influences
2. Is there a primary intention to bolster autocracy?
Yes → Autocratic sponsorship No → Unintended Influences
3. Are the principal motivations ideological in nature?
Yes → Autocracy promotion No → Democracy Resistance

Table 1. Operationalised after Tansey, 2016 (Tansey, 2016).

3.3 Authoritarian Collaboration

To complement democratic backsliding and autocratic promotion, *authoritarian collaboration* will be used. Both Russia and Hungary are classified as non-democratic states, therefore the theory can be applied.

There has been a very common misconception assuming authoritarian states are less likely to cooperate regarding international politics than democracies. While this is true in relation to cooperation with democratic states, it is not true when it comes to other authoritarian countries. In fact, there has been a rather large uptick in the recent decade in collaboration between autocratic regimes, where they collaborate through formal organisations and informal channels. They gain to either entrench their rule, disrupt democratic civil society, stabilise their regime or extend their reach of repressive institutions beyond state borders (Cottiero & Emmons, 2024:3). Collaboration with other like-minded autocratic states is what is most beneficial for them. Even international organisations, such as the EU, that used to be strictly for democracies, have had to accommodate authoritarian member countries (Cottiero & Emmons, 2024:6).

There are many threats that authoritarian regimes have in common, these include stigmatisation and illegitimacy of their governance abroad, pro-democracy groups and dissenters at home, conditionalities on greatly needed loans or aid that prioritise other democratic structures and policies, and increased and evolving security threats. As a response to this, authoritarian states have created a support system for each other, sharing information, working to legitimise their repressive practices, helping each other stand stable from shocks and crises as results from international

scrutiny and contributing resources for managing critical constituencies. By having this network of support authoritarian regimes help each other entrench their authoritarian practices (Cottiero & Emmons, 2024:3).

The way authoritarian regimes cooperate has also changed and evolved, as it used to be mostly through repression to prevent regime change, that is no longer the case. Today, legitimation and co-optation are just as important tools for authoritarian and hybrid regime stability. Legitimation in this case refers to efforts to create positive public perceptions, making their “right” to rule seem righteous. Co-optation means creating institutions to share resources and power with supporters of the regime, which also political parties and legislatures work for within the regimes. The end goal with authoritarian collaboration is to promote stability within the regimes and reduce the possibility of democratisation. It is the joint actions that are being undertaken for mutual gain. Non-democratic powers fall within this category as well, as they cooperate in new ways across political and economic domains (Cottiero & Emmons, 2024:6-7).

4 Methodology

In this chapter the method and operationalisation of said method will be presented, as well as why they are the best choice to answer the research question. After that a presentation of the chosen material will follow.

4.1.1 Idea and ideology analysis

This study will employ a qualitative case study with an idea and ideology analysis as its method in order to examine how the relationship between Hungary and Russia has played a role in Hungary's democratic backsliding between 2010-2022. The case study method is suitable for understanding complex political developments in depth and in context when analysing external actors, in this case Russia, and how they may influence internal political dynamics, e.g. through autocracy promotion or authoritarian collaboration. The idea and ideology method is suitable for examining how people see and construct the world around them, as well as how they motivate and justify their actions and positions through their ideas and ideologies. The method also helps us answer what kind of consequences an idea may have for the development of society, i.e. how the ideas may spread and why some groups adopt certain ideologies (Bergström & Svärd, 2018:134-138). A narrative analysis or a discourse analysis could have been applied, however, an idea and ideation analysis was concluded to best answer the research question.

To understand people and the societies they have built we must understand how they see the world, i.e. their ideas. Furthermore ideas can only be studied indirectly, as they are an abstract concept. It is the material evidence of ideas that can be studied. An idea and ideology analysis can come in many forms, this study will conduct a descriptive and explaining idea analysis and then use ideal types to further operationalise. From these material traces one can produce an account of an underlying idea world. To uncover these ideas and ideologies one must move back and forth between the chosen material and the pre-set assumptions. It is a retroductive analysis (Bergström & Svärd, 2018:139-140).

4.1.2 Operationalisation

As already mentioned, a descriptive and explaining idea analysis will be provided. The descriptive part of the analysis is needed to establish a good foundation upon which our analysis can be further built. Here we are trying to discover something that is not clear simply by looking at the material. We can also do comparisons with different ideas, describing differences and similarities. This will inevitably be an interpretation of the chosen material, as it is not a neutral recount (Bergström & Svärd, 2018:141-142).

Questions that are being asked during the descriptive idea analysis:

- *What ideas are being expressed in the material?*
- *How do these ideas relate to each other?*
- *What messages are explicit and what messages are underlying or latent?*
- *Are former descriptions and interpretations of the ideas correct?*
- *Has there been a historical change of the ideas and ideologies that are being studied?*

The ambitions with the idea and ideology analysis are: To discover how the relationship between Viktor Orbán's Hungary and Vladimir Putin's Russia have accelerated the democratic backsliding in Hungary between the years 2010-2022. The explaining part of the idea analysis aims to study the causes and consequences of ideas in a bigger societal perspective. We will be focusing on the consequences, which is needed to help answer our research question. This part of the analysis is not interested in the content of the idea, instead the idea's origin and aftermath (Bergström & Svärd, 2018:142).

Questions that are being asked in the explaining idea analysis:

- *What effects does a particular idea or ideology have on the following development of society?*
- *What societal course of events ignited the ideas?*
- *In which direction are the connections between ideas and other societal phenomenon moving?*
- *How much of a transformation can be explained by the ideas' impact and what is explained by other factors?*

With the explaining idea and ideology analysis we are trying to put the individual ideas of Orbán and Putin in a bigger context and demonstrate connections between ideas' development and other events, processes and structures in society. The ideas are a segment in a bigger course of events. To

accomplish a satisfactory explaining idea analysis complementary material is needed to underscore the ideas and their consequences, which in this study is the chosen theories and added analytical material (Bergström & Svärd, 2018:142).

Lastly, we will use the ideal type analysis to complement our method. The ideal type analysis allows us to properly examine our material and get an overview. The first step is to define the ideas and ideologies that are being examined. Here we will be putting liberal democracy against illiberal democracy against authoritarianism to create a clear grid. These idea and ideological movements between the grids will give us indications of backsliding. The next step is to relate the ideal types to the chosen empirical material, which we will do in our analysis. Here we will examine to which extent the different statements in the material correspond to the ideal types. This also allows us to see whether there has been any significant change over time, in this case between 2010-2022. This is helping us unlock to see the sways of ideas and ideologies (Bergström & Svärd, 2018:149-150).

Liberal democracy	Illiberal democracy	Authoritarianism
Rule by the people	Freely elected officials but the officials do not take the people into consideration	The people are not taken into consideration
Power of Government is limited	Power of Government is presented as limited	Power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader or small elite
Free elections are held	Elections are held but they are not free	No established mechanism for the transfer of power
Freedom and rights of individuals are protected by constitutional norms and institutions	Freedom and rights of individuals is not completely free	Repression of individual freedom of thought
Pluralism and toleration	Nation-centric, favours traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity	No civil liberties, pluralism is not accepted
Freedom of speech	Limited freedom of speech	Freedom of speech is controlled

Table 2. Ideal types adapted from Bergström & Svärd, 2018 (Bergström & Svärd, 2018:147-152), Liberal democracy (Munro, 2025), illiberal democracy (Laruelle, 2022) and authoritarianism (Lindstaedt, 2025).

4.2 Material

The main empirical material chosen for the study are speeches by Viktor Orbán and press conferences hosted by Vladimir Putin between 2010-2022. This includes press conferences where the two have spoken together, and they will all henceforth be referred to as speeches when presented as material. These speeches have been chosen on the criteria that they must be directly spoken by the two leaders, and not a press secretary or the like. They have also been chosen over less emblematic speeches, as they are more significant to the analysis. The press conferences are shorter and they are meant to give indication of the relationship between Orbán and Putin, while Orbán's speeches are meant to give a deeper understanding of the ideological development. To keep the analysis as extensive yet solid as possible, the speeches are spaced out every 4 years, with one exception, which allows for ideational pattern recognition. All speeches have been found already translated and they will be presented in chronological order.

To complement this material outside sources such as reports and articles will be used, as they are needed to complete the idea and ideological analysis that has been chosen to answer the research question.

4.2.1 Speeches

The first speech used in the analysis is *Prime Minister Vladimir Putin holds talks with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán*. The speech is a press conference held by Putin alongside Orbán when the Hungarian prime minister was visiting Moscow in 2010, not long after he had won the Hungarian parliamentary election. The speech is posted to the archived website of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and is no longer in use, however the material is still accessible. In the speech the then two prime ministers⁵ talk about the countries' future collaborations and how they look forward to a fruitful relationship (ARCHIVE OF THE OFFICIAL SITE OF THE 2008-2012 PRIME MINISTER OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION VLADIMIR PUTIN - Events, 2010). The purpose of this speech is to set a beginning for our analysis and contextualise where the relationship between the two began.

⁵ Between 2008-2012 Putin was Prime Minister of Russia, in 2012 he was elected the President of the Russian Federation for his third term (Ray, 2025).

The second material used in the analysis is *Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation Speech* held in 2011. It was published to the 'Website of the Hungarian Government' that was in use between 2010-2014, the material is still accessible nevertheless. The speech was held not one year after his descent to becoming prime minister for the second time. In the speech Orbán speaks openly about future plans and the material was chosen as a starting premise for the analysis (Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation Address, 2011).

The third speech chosen is *Beginning of meeting with Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban*, a short interaction between Orbán and Putin in 2014 in Moscow when the Hungarian prime minister was on a state visit. The speech is the opening statements to a meeting they are about to have and is rather short, however it was chosen as it provides context (Beginning of Meeting With Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban, 2014).

The fourth speech is *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp*, held by Orbán in the city of Tusnádfürdő in Romania in 2014. The prime minister held a lecture on the 26th of July for a gathering of students and civilians. This speech has become rather famous as it is the first one where Orbán openly announces his anti-liberal manifesto. In the speech he declares a new era for Hungary and a conscious choice to move away from liberal democracy, as it has done the country no good over the last 20 years. The speech was chosen because of its significance and as a clear turning point for Orbán and will provide an important context for the analysis (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp, 2014).

The fifth speech used for the analysis is held by Orbán again in Tusnádfürdő in 2018. The speech was transcribed and published to the 'About Hungary' website, which is the new official website. It is another lecture where he speaks on a number of concerns, such as stability, competition, Europe and Putin. The speech was chosen for the analysis as it concerns the pivotal themes and displays an advancement in the ideational concepts that Orbán displays outward (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, 2018).

The sixth speech chosen for the analysis is *Press conference on Russian-Hungarian talks*, held in Moscow in 2018 during yet another state visit by Orbán. After having private talks the president and the prime minister step out to give an account of their conversation and to answer questions. The

result is often needless and excessive compliments on each other's achievements in many areas, such as economic, cultural and ideological. The material was chosen because it highlights how the leaders' relationship has continued to grow and also how the result of this has serious repercussions (Press Conference on Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2018).

The seventh speech chosen is *News conference following Russian-Hungarian talks*, another press conference held in 2022 in Moscow. It was transcribed and published to the 'President of Russia' website. Here the two leaders speak about the difficulties of the pandemic, but nevertheless how they have prevailed. The material was chosen as it shows how the Russian-Hungarian relations are steadily developing (News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2022).

The eighth speech chosen for the analysis is the *Speech given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after swearing his ministerial oath* in 2022. It was transcribed and posted to the official 'About Hungary' website. Orbán says his heartfelt thanks to the Hungarian people for choosing to trust him and his party once again and then he speaks about the past, the future and how Hungary will prevail. The Russo-Ukraine war, christianity, the EU and NATO are key subjects in this speech and it was chosen as a cut to again show the ideational progress that the prime minister has undergone (Speech Given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán After Swearing His Prime Ministerial Oath, 2022).

4.2.2 Complementary material

To conduct a satisfactory idea and ideology analysis complementary material is needed to uncover the hidden ideational meanings in the speeches (Bergström & Svärd, 2018:142). The complementary text chosen for the material in form of speeches is *Hungary's Illiberal Democracy*, a text by Innes (2015). This text conveys how Orbán and his party Fidesz have been actively reducing the liberal democracy in Hungary since arising to power (Innes, 2015). The text was published as a journal article in March 2015 in *Current History* which is a publication devoted exclusively to international affairs. They claim to observe and explain profound changes that are happening in the world and provide readers with a better understanding of the crucial events happening today (Current History, n.d.).

5 Analysis

This analysis systematically examines selected speeches by Victor Orbán and press conferences with Orbán and Putin in chronological order. Applying the operationalised method to trace ideational developments, it identifies shift and emphasis on ideological dimensions and observes an increasing trend in Russia-friendly rhetoric.

5.1 2010-2011

In the press conference *Prime Minister Vladimir Putin holds talks with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán* from 2010 a notably positive tone is expressed between the two leaders. There is mainly a wish to bind the two countries together diplomatically and through economic collaboration. (ARCHIVE OF THE OFFICIAL SITE OF THE 2008-2012 PRIME MINISTER OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION VLADIMIR PUTIN - Events, 2010) Notably, this warmth marked a sharp contrast to Orbán's earlier anti-Russian stance (Kiszelly, 2025). He had been a vocal critic since his early career, therefore this sudden openness was surprising (Végh, 2015). Now he expresses great respect and almost admiration for the Russian Prime Minister. "I'm also grateful for our last year's meeting", Orbán says referencing the meeting that put him on a different trajectory (ARCHIVE OF THE OFFICIAL SITE OF THE 2008-2012 PRIME MINISTER OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION VLADIMIR PUTIN - Events, 2010).

The next speech is *Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation address*. The most prominent themes Orbán expresses are renewal, reorganisation and rebirth, meaning the underlying ideas are a shift away from liberal democratic values. Hungary, according to Orbán, has gone through a weak and depressed period where renewal is the only way forward. He emphasises that renewal will be painful, stating that "Hungary needs a new constitution that manifests the Hungarian spirit" (Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation Address, 2011). We know that he indeed did proceed to change the constitution, which can be marked as a major step towards his ideal illiberal state. In the first three years of taking office in 2010 Orbán implemented over 700 legislative acts, where only a fragment were brought up for public consultation and discussion. (Innes, 2015:95:96). He also says many remarks about prioritising Christianity, which he will use as a gateway in later speeches to promote his anti-LGBTQ+ agenda. Some of the remarks he makes can be interpreted as early movements away from the EU, e.g. the dire straits the Hungarian economy is in "will not be saved by the Euro

Zone”. Although this early speech largely aligns with the liberal democratic ideal type (See Table 2), it plants several seeds that later develop into anti-liberal and pro-Russian tendencies. He ends the speech with “2011 is the year of renewal. Renewal is being born again. Renewal is struggle. Renewal is a mission” (Viktor Orbán’s State of the Nation Address, 2011).

5.2 2014

The next press conference, *Beginning of meeting with Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban*, takes place in 2014. This is a short talk held at the beginning of an extensive meeting between the two. Putin expresses that he is thankful for their meetings, that they are regular and that they “are developing in all areas”. In turn Orbán thanks Putin and emphasises that outside of the EU, Russia is the country’s most important trade and economic partner. Again, there is a lot of promise of continuing their relations (Beginning of Meeting With Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban, 2014). At the time Orbán had yet to win his second election, and still held the EU in somewhat high regard. However a few months later, after his third win, he began actively moving away and the relationship between Hungary and the EU became incredibly strained (Innes, 2015:95).

The fourth speech is the *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp* lecture held in 2014. Here Orbán is fresh off his parliamentary elections victory, as well as a major EU victory. This speech marks a major shift in Orbán’s rhetoric towards the West and liberal democracy. He openly condemns the President of the United States⁶, the financial crisis is credited to be “a Western financial crisis” and he states several failures of the Western world. One of them is explicitly condemning liberal values as they “embody corruption, sex and violence”, which is a clear distancing. He also mentions that Eastern Europe is in a free fall and that is partly because it is occupied by taking care of immigrants and has “forgotten about the white working class”. From an ideational standpoint this is understood as racism. The end point is to blame the Western way and liberalism (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp, 2014).

After the long spiel about how western ideals are bad Orbán explains that a liberal democracy is not the only fruitful way to organise a state, “... systems that are not Western, not liberal democracies, perhaps even democracies, and yet make nations successful”. As prosperous examples he presents

⁶ At the time the President of the United States was Barack Obama (The Presidents, 2015)

amongst others Russia and China (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp, 2014). He insisted that he is doing his best to cut ties to Western dogmas, and making Hungary independent from them. This is not the only instance where Orbán declares a turn away from the neoliberal economic orthodoxies that dominated most of the region's conversion from communism (Innes, 2015:95). He declares the new Hungarian state and says that democracy does not have to be liberal, illiberal democracy works too. He also refers to the opposition and protestors as "political activists paid by foreigners" and that he must therefore have a committee set up in Parliament to deal with and monitor them (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp, 2014). Here we have clearly moved to the illiberal democracy ideal type, in terms of limited free speech, anti-pluralism and power of government (see Table 2) and the result is harder implementations from government. He has also been consistent in undermining pluralism, in civil society, in the party system, in media and cultural spheres, and in the economy. A diverse opinion is seen as a seed for instability and indecision, causing harm. Fidesz has also adopted the well known dichotomy of enemies vs friends, painting a picture where the nation must be saved. They emphasise family, nation and church, all aligned with the party's national conservatism (Innes, 2015:96).

5.3 2018

After another four years, Orbán held another lecture at the Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp. This speech is heavily underscored with Hungary as a loyal stable nation with family and christianity at the forefront (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, 2018). Orbán and Fidesz have once again won the Parliamentary election, however this time around it is heavily criticised for not having been a free and democratic win (Walker & Boffey, 2018). There is a clear shift from the shyness and underlying tones from previous years' speeches to explicit and blatant statements. These statements are heavily focused the pureness of christianity and how immigration and islam are a threat, e.g. "a new constitutional order based on national and christian values", "I can confidently say that Székely⁷ will still exist when the whole of Europe has already submitted to Islam" and "every European country has the right to defend its Christian culture, and the right to reject multiculturalism" (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open

⁷ Székely, or Szekler, is an ethnic identity which originates from Hungary and is settled in what is now Transylvania, Romania (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998).

University and Student Camp, 2018). Orbán is now outright stating that pluralism is harmful, which is consistent with both illiberal democracy and authoritarianism (see Table 2).

What becomes most clear from an ideational perspective in this speech however, is the importance Orbán puts on reprehending liberalism and western liberalism. A third of the speech is spent on this in one way or another, either through criticising the EU, showing support for Putin and Russia, “The EU is pursuing a crude policy on Russia”, uplifting Christianity, “christian democracy cannot be liberal”, talking about unification and similarities; it all leads to the same anti-liberal point. “Liberal democracy is in favour of multiculturalism, this is bad, christian democracy, which is illiberal democracy, is anti-immigration”. There is also mention of Europe’s continued political shift to the right (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, 2018). By this point in time Orbán is completely in the illiberal democracy ideal type, and starting to bravely cozy up to authoritarianism (see Table 2).

The next is *Press conference on Russian-Hungarian talks*, held in 2018 a few months after Orbán’s speech. Here Orbán again meets with Putin in Moscow and they hold a press conference after having “*very substantive and constructive talks*”, as the president puts it. There is a clear trend with Orbán, the more he rejects Western Europe and Western liberalism, the more positively he talks about Hungary’s relations with Putin and Russia. This can be heard from the statements he makes, e.g. “in recent years we have become reliable partners for each other” and “reliability is a very important currency in modern world politics, therefore we highly appreciate our relations with Russia”. He also notes the cultural similarities between the two countries. Putin makes a great point of emphasising that Hungary is their most important partner in Central Europe, and he mentions Russia-EU relations (Press Conference on Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2018).

5.4 2022

Then follows *News conference following Russian-Hungarian talks*, a press conference held in Moscow in 2022. It is important to note that this visit by Orbán happened February 1st (News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2022), Russia’s full scale military attack on Ukraine occurred February 24th (Davis & Fitzgerald, 2025). With that in mind, the press conference was again held after the two leaders had been in talks for hours. Putin has a very appreciative tone towards Orbán and anew points out that Hungary is one of Russia’s most important partners in not only Central Europe, but Europe as a whole. He says that he wants to distribute gas further into

Western Europe through Hungary and compliments them on being a “reliable partner”. They also speak highly of their joint humanitarian and cultural cooperation. When it is Orbán’s turn to speak he highlights the long collaboration they have had, that the EU is a unit and do not want to enter disagreement with Russia and that Hungary thrives when the West and the East are in good relations, “I welcome dialogue between Russia and our Western allies” (News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2022).

The last speech in our analysis is *Speech given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after swearing his ministerial oath* in May of 2022. Again Orbán and Fidesz have won the parliamentary election and this time there are no longer any doubts about the position of his ideational stance. The abundantly clear ideas are christianity, anti-immigration, anti-pluralism and illiberalism (Speech Given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán After Swearing His Prime Ministerial Oath, 2022). There is again claims of voter fraud and voter manipulation (Bálint Magyar, Bálint Madlovics: Hungary 2022: Election Manipulation and the Regime’s Attempts at Electoral Fraud | CEU Democracy Institute, n.d.). He addresses these claims by stating “everyone could see that Hungary is a country where electoral abuses do not and cannot happen”, without presenting proof. He boasts about Hungary’s strong democracy and how Brussels, meaning the EU, were hoping for his downfall. He also explains that all the bad things that have happened since 2020 are to be blamed on Europe and Westerners, taking a clear stance. This speech is also concentrated on Christianity and anti-immigration. He talks about “a European population replacement programme” which he explains seeks to “replace the missing European Christian Children with migrants”. Liberal Europe is a threat to all things sacred, according to Orbán (Speech Given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán After Swearing His Prime Ministerial Oath, 2022).

The Russo-Ukrainian war is addressed and condemned, but no blame is put specifically on Russia. Instead, Orbán castigates the trade blockades and sanctions that have been put towards Russia, claiming that they are ineffective and announces that “Hungary will not block sanctions”. He also makes it clear that NATO is a defence alliance and that it should not be transformed into “a military alliance of war”, meaning it should not attack Russia. Orbán claims to support Ukraine, however mentions that the President of Ukraine interfered with the Hungarian election campaign and supported his opponents. He criticises the EU, but emphasises that it is important to stay a member. He talks about a cultural distance, “almost cultural alienation” between christian Hungary and

liberal Western Europe (Speech Given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán After Swearing His Prime Ministerial Oath, 2022).

6 Discussion

The discussion will be divided into the previously presented theories, and examples from the analysis will be used to highlight the concepts.

Democratic backsliding

Backsliding is no longer only the blatant and quick loss of democracy that it used to be during the aftermath of The Cold War. It can take many forms and these forms may come at different speeds depending on a plethora of reasons. What we see most is backsliding taking on the form of gradual change across a more confined set of institutions, which also entails that it is less likely to end in a regime change and more plausible to give way to a hybrid authoritarian-democratic political system. What this means is that backsliding can embody a complete democratic breakdown, but it can also seriously weaken existing democratic institutions. In the latter case, where backsliding yields undefined and somewhat fluid and unclear situations, it makes it substantially harder to take action against it and to defend democracy, which is the case with Hungary (Bermeo, 2016).

Using the backsliding provided by Carothers and Press (2022), grievance fuelled illiberalism, we can apply it to Orbán. He used the 2008 financial crisis that caused extremely hard times for Hungary to win sympathy and gain support among Hungarian citizens. Once the election of 2010 was won he continued to politicise this grievance to justify his dismantling of democratic institutions (Charothers & Press, 2022:12-13). This can be seen quite clearly in his 2011 speech where he speaks of “renewal” and “rebirth”, while making sure to point out that renewal is painful and a struggle (Viktor Orbán’s State of the Nation Address, 2011). Providing results allowed him to attack the constitution while simultaneously maintaining public support. Carothers and Press explain that citizens can sometimes be willing to tolerate some degree of democratic loss, if that also means having their grievance justified (Charothers & Press, 2022:12-13).

Bermeo’s (2016) definitions can also be implemented quite clearly. Executive aggrandisement illustrates institutional change legally decreed by a freely elected official. Since the institutional change has been determined by a freely elected official it can be said to be the result of democracy, and therefore the will of the people (Bermeo, 2016). As seen in the 2011 speech by Orbán he quite openly says that constitutional change is needed in order to get Hungary on the right track again and manifest the Hungarian spirit (Viktor Orbán’s State of the Nation Address, 2011). From an outside perspective this is a clear warning sign of backsliding, as changing a democratic constitution should

not be done lightly. It does not help that there were over 700 legislative acts that to most part were implemented without public consultation (Innes, 2015:95:96). These institutional changes are carefully designed to weaken and disassemble the very democratic institutions that allowed them to be elected (Bermeo, 2016).

Another quite clear backsliding by Orbán is his strategic manipulation of elections (Bermeo, 2016). We know that he blatantly denies that any such sort of thing has ever happened in Hungary, as he clearly states in his 2022 speech after swearing his ministerial oath for the fifth time, fourth consecutive time. There is however something to be said about the need to state that (Speech Given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán After Swearing His Prime Ministerial Oath, 2022). Similar critiques have been pointed towards Orbán and Fidesz since his parliamentary win in 2014, and 2018 (Walker & Boffey, 2018), and 2022. This form of backsliding is a slow strategy, shown in hampering media access, putting down opponents and using government funds for campaigns. All can be appointed to Orbán and his personal recipe for backsliding (Bermeo, 2016).

Autocracy promotion

When discussing autocracy promotion we are looking at agency, intentions and motives applied to Putin and Russia towards Orbán and Hungary, as explained by Tansey (2016). From the material chosen for the analysis we cannot by 100 percent certainty demonstrate Putin's intentions. We can, however, classify Russia as a nation with agency acting out of intent and motive.

Tansey tells us that in order to discover intent one can look at statements provided by the actors in question, i.e. Putin. From the joint press conferences held between Putin and Orbán such statements can be uncovered, although quite subtle. In the first press conference from 2010 Putin states that there is a great wish to have a fruitful and economic collaboration with Hungary and the newly elected Orbán (ARCHIVE OF THE OFFICIAL SITE OF THE 2008-2012 PRIME MINISTER OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION VLADIMIR PUTIN - Events, 2010). This can be seen again in the press conference held in 2014 where Putin states that he is pleased with their regular meetings and that the collaboration is developing in all areas (Beginning of Meeting With Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán, 2014). In 2018 Putin underscores the importance of having Hungary as a partner, and that they are Russia's most important associate in Central Europe (Press Conference on Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2018). This comes back up again in the 2022 press conference, again giving Hungary the title of Russia's most important partner. This time it is also accompanied with

statements about cultural and humanitarian collaboration wanting this to continue for the foreseeable future (News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2022).

Although these may seem as weak attestations to autocracy promotion, they are suspicious when put together with motives. Motives, Tansey explains, are what is behind the intention of promoting autocratic rule and can vary to several degrees. The motive to promote autocratic rule to not have democracy “spread” is conceptually very interesting, but cannot be proven from our analysis. The second motive concerning aligning policies, however, can. According to Tansey there is a wish from powerful states to endorse and protect authoritarian regimes abroad to ensure supportive and compliant allies. By having them remain in power it creates a network of non-democratic regimes which comes in very handy as division between government and popular opinion (Tansey, 2016). Throughout all presented press conferences held with Putin and Orbán there is a general thankfulness about being able to continue their collaboration, both economically and culturally, e.g. Putin’s appreciative tone towards Orbán in 2022 (News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2022).

The third motive presented by Tansey is perhaps the most detrimental one as it is ideologically driven, i.e. there is commitment to promote the ideological aspect of autocracy (Tansey, 2016). As this is ideational it is harder to prove, but by looking at the material from a joint perspective, one can argue that Putin is quite happy with Orbán’s development. In general the friendliness between the two has steadily increased over the years (ARCHIVE OF THE OFFICIAL SITE OF THE 2008-2012 PRIME MINISTER OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION VLADIMIR PUTIN - Events, 2010; Beginning of Meeting With Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán, 2014; Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, 2018; News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2022). This could be attributed to simply becoming better colleagues, but it could also be explained by the increased backsliding and illiberal values implemented by Orbán (Bermeo, 2016; Carothers & Press, 2022).

Authoritarian collaboration

Simply stating that backsliding is happening and Putin is promoting autocracy is not a satisfactory answer, as Orbán himself has gone to great lengths to support and collaborate with Russia. Our third theory gives a deeper understanding of this. Both Hungary and Russia are classified as non-democratic states, therefore the theory can be applied. Cottiero & Emmons (2024) demonstrate that

authoritarian states are very willing to collaborate with each other, as they have a lot to gain from this, e.g. stabilise their regime, entrench their rule or disrupt democratic civil society. Having a network of collaboration ensures safety for autocratic regimes, as they help each avoid threats such as stigmatisation, pro-democracy groups or not having trade partners (Cottiero & Emmons, 2024:3:6).

The collaborations can happen through formal organisation or more informal channels. Throughout all the press conferences held between Putin and Orbán between 2010-2022 we see great focus on this, especially economic and trade collaborations. We also see that Putin is willing to loan to Hungary, and great investments are being made between the two countries (ARCHIVE OF THE OFFICIAL SITE OF THE 2008-2012 PRIME MINISTER OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION VLADIMIR PUTIN - Events, 2010; Beginning of Meeting With Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán, 2014; Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, 2018; News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2022). Cottiero & Emmons also explain that authoritarian collaboration helps with international scrutiny. In his 2018 speech Orbán speaks out in support of Russia, claiming that the EU is driving a very crude policy towards the country (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, 2018). He does this again in his 2022 speech, even though more subtle he avoids putting blame on Russia and instead talks about a wider responsibility (Speech Given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán After Swearing His Prime Ministerial Oath, 2022).

However the main advantage to gain from authoritarian collaboration is legitimisation. Legitimation is needed to create positive public perceptions. Even though it might not be completely successful, having other states claim that you are righteous in your rule helps immensely. The end goal is to promote stability within the regimes, minimising the possibility of democratisation, ending in great mutual gain (Cottiero & Emmons, 2024:3:6-7). Both Orbán and Putin put great efforts towards this, promoting each other's regimes and claiming rightful rule, as seen in the analysis (ARCHIVE OF THE OFFICIAL SITE OF THE 2008-2012 PRIME MINISTER OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION VLADIMIR PUTIN - Events, 2010; Beginning of Meeting With Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán, 2014; Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, 2018; News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks, 2022)

7 Conclusions

In summary this study has traced the ideational development of Viktor Orbán's political discourse from 2010 to 2022, using an idea and ideology analysis, revealing a steady and deliberate shift away from liberal democratic principles toward illiberalism and soft authoritarianism. Through a chronological review of speeches and public statements, it is evident that Orbán has increasingly framed Hungary's identity around national conservatism, Christianity, and anti-liberal values. Simultaneously distancing the country from the European Union and aligning rhetorically and diplomatically with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Drawing on the frameworks of democratic backsliding, autocracy promotion and authoritarian collaboration, the discussion highlights how Orbán has strategically dismantled democratic institutions through legal mechanisms, justified by populist grievance narratives and national renewal rhetoric. This supports Bermeo's (2016) concept of executive aggrandisement and strategic manipulation of elections, as well as Carothers and Press (2022) notion of grievance-fuelled illiberalism. By invoking economic hardship and social instability, Orbán has garnered public legitimacy for constitutional changes, media control, and civil society restrictions.

While explicit evidence of Russian autocracy promotion remains elusive, the discussion demonstrates a consistent pattern of ideational and strategic alignment between Hungary and Russia. Putin's repeated praise of Hungary as a "reliable partner", alongside Orbán's increasingly sympathetic stance towards Russia, especially in the context of EU sanctions and the war on Ukraine, suggests a mutually beneficial relationship. In line with Tansey's (2016) framework, the relationship embodies not just economic cooperation, but also a shared ideological resistance to Western liberal norms.

Furthermore, the theory of authoritarian collaboration by Cottiero and Emmans (2024) helps illuminate the broader function of this partnership: the reinforcement of regime stability, the circumvention of international criticism, and the legitimation of illiberal governance. Orbán's public endorsements of Russia and his downplaying of democratic erosion serve not only domestic purposes, but contribute to a transnational network of illiberal states that shield each other from democratic pressures.

Finally, Hungary's case exemplifies how illiberalism can be constructed and maintained within the formal structures of a democracy, particularly when bolstered by strategic international alliances and ideational reframing. It demonstrates that democratic backsliding in the 21st century is not always sudden or violent, but often incremental, legalistic, and rhetorically justified. As such, the Hungarian trajectory under Orbán poses a critical challenge to the European Union and the international democratic community: how to respond when democratic decay comes from within, not despite, but because of electoral legitimacy. As presented in the introduction, democracy is not something to take for granted, and must constantly be supported and fought for. The fact that leaders like Orbán can openly state that they are moving away from liberal virtues should not be taken lightly.

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8.1 Appendix

1. Are external actors intentionally seeking to shape domestic politics?
Yes → Active influences No → Passive influences
2. Is there a primary intention to bolster autocracy?
Yes → Autocratic sponsorship No → Unintended Influences
3. Are the principal motivations ideological in nature?
Yes → Autocracy promotion No → Democracy Resistance

Table 1. Operationalised after Tansey, 2018 (Tansey, 2016).

Liberal democracy	Illiberal democracy	Authoritarianism
Rule by the people	Freely elected officials but the officials do not take the people into consideration	The people are not taken into consideration
Power of Government is limited	Power of Government is presented as limited	Power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader or small elite
Free elections are held	Elections are held but they are not free	No established mechanism for the transfer of power
Freedom and rights of individuals are protected by constitutional norms and institutions	Freedom and rights of individuals is not completely free	Repression of individual freedom of thought
Pluralism and toleration	Nation-centric, favours traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity	No civil liberties, pluralism is not accepted
Freedom of speech	Limited freedom of speech	Freedom of speech is controlled

Table 2. Ideal types adapted from Bergström & Svärd, 2018 (Bergström & Svärd, 2018:147-152), Liberal democracy (Munro, 2025), illiberal democracy (Laruelle, 2022) and authoritarianism (Lindstaedt, 2025).