

The Problem of Ideological Approaches to Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Hungary and Fidesz¹

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Abstract

This study examines the ideological foundations of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz Party, challenging prevailing interpretations that describe Hungary's political transformation since 2010 as merely a case of pragmatic authoritarianism or electoral manipulation. While much of the literature attributes Fidesz's repeated electoral success to institutional asymmetries and illiberal regime structures, this paper argues that the party's endurance and popular legitimacy stem from the consolidation of a coherent ideological framework: nationalist conservatism. Drawing on recent scholarships and Fidesz's intellectual networks, the study situates the Orbán regime within a broader global movement that seeks to replace neoliberal universalism with communitarian and paternalistic values grounded in nation, family, and faith. It analyzes how the regime has developed an ideological synthesis—combining illiberal conservatism, civilizational ethnocentrism, and paternalist populism—those functions as a counter-hegemonic alternative to liberal democracy. By exploring the intellectual lineage from thinkers such as Roger Scruton and Yoram Hazony, the paper demonstrates that Hungary has become both the laboratory and exemplar of a new nationalist-conservative ideology shaping right-wing politics globally. Thus, Fidesz's case illustrates the limits of ideologically neutral explanations of authoritarianism and underscores the need to reexamine the role of ideology in sustaining contemporary illiberal regimes.

Key words: Fidesz Party, Authoritarian Regimes, Victor Orban, Nationalist Conservatism, Ideology

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1. Introduction

Viktor Orban and his party Fidesz, who won the 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022 elections in Hungary, have successfully used the anti-liberal emotional legacy of the Hungarian right to create an authoritarian regime; with the new regime they have built, they have turned Hungary into the first member state within the EU that is not considered democratic. In a relatively short period of 10 years, he has transformed liberal institutions through legal means and altered the philosophical foundations of democratic discourse, becoming seen as the creator of a new type of authoritarian regime that embraces broad segments of society (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Levitsky and Lucan, 2020). In this country, the purest form of illiberal ideology has taken shape, and the country has become a reference point for describing and classifying the tensions created by authoritarianism or the rise of the far right. Hungary has become a model country among nations moving away from the set of liberal-democratic values and toward authoritarianism on a global scale. Viktor Orbán's more than 15 years in power pioneered the dismantling of the monopoly established by liberal democracy after the Cold War and triggered the wave of authoritarianism dating back to after 2008.

Social scientists have published numerous analyses and conducted discussions on the reasons behind Fidesz's success in securing a two-thirds majority, the number required to amend the constitution, for the fourth consecutive time in the general elections held in April 2022. Looking at the results of these studies, the basis for electoral success is shown to be unfair electoral competition under authoritarian conditions, with ideology taking a back seat. However, without an ideological foundation as a force that enables mass mobilization and helps consolidate the voter base, it is nearly impossible for a political party to achieve electoral success. Therefore, this study analyses the debates surrounding the ideological universe of the Fidesz party and put forward that the party has become the institutional pioneer of the newly emerging nationalist conservative ideology.

2. Fidesz: An Ideological Party or A Pragmatic Election Machine?

Scheppelle (2022), in an article written three days after the 2022 elections, attributed the opposition's defeat to the unfairness of the electoral system and the inequality of campaign conditions, Bozoki, on the other hand, saw the institutional infrastructure of the authoritarian regime as the main reason for the difficulty of changing power (Windisch, 2022). Szikra and Orenstein (2022), stated that the main motivation directing voters to vote for Fidesz was the material rewards and promises distributed within the framework of the election economy; Andras Biro Nagy (2023) analyzed that voters decided on Fidesz after the war in Ukraine due to the increased search for security and stability during times of war. Mueller (2022), on the other hand, used the concept of "electoral authoritarianism" for Hungary, stating that the elections were "sham" and that the results were predetermined. Those who emphasize that the mistakes of Peter Marki Zay, the joint prime

ministerial candidate put forward by the opposition against Orbán, determined the election results are mostly analysts from within Hungary (Bíró-Nagy, 2022). It is an indisputable fact that all of these reasons listed by social scientists played a significant role in Fidesz's election victory. The state apparatus acts entirely in accordance with Orbán's political strategy; the judiciary, which is supposed to oversee his actions, instead creates legal obstacles to the opposition's struggle. (Magyar, 2016). At the same time, Orbán, who determines the distribution of wealth in the country, has thus transformed capital groups, civil society organizations, and the media into apparatuses of his political project (Magyar and Madlovics, 2020). Under Fidesz's control, this structure, which functions as a unified giant apparatus, ensures that enormous material resources enable the party to operate like an election machine, thereby mobilizing voters continuously and efficiently. The regime's entire legal, institutional, and economic structure is designed to maximize Fidesz's votes and is built to make losing elections difficult. While this perspective facilitates a quick conclusion about the course of the political struggle, it falls short in understanding how voters gain the motivation to repeatedly vote for Fidesz in every election. This is because these analyses share the common assumption that the relationship Fidesz has established with its voters is illegitimate. However, the hypothesis that Fidesz's mass mobilization, which is the real subject of political science or comparative politics, may have been achieved through a consistent ideology that challenges liberal democracy has not been the subject of research so far (Kolozova and Milanese, 2023).

The reluctance of experts to examine whether the Orbán regime has a consistent ideology stem from the fact that the literature on democratization and authoritarianism in political sociology has developed considering the hegemonic position of (neo)-liberal ideology. The source of the explicit or implicit superiority attributed to neoliberalism lies in its ability to defeat authoritarian regimes in Latin America and communist regimes in Eastern Europe across very different geographies. Consequently, in countries embarking on the path of democratization, this ideology is seen as an unquestionable modernizing elixir. Moreover, any position taken against liberal policies has been accused of opposing social progress and the pursuit of freedom, thus being labeled as anachronistic. For this reason, in all post-communist countries embarking on the path of democratization, particularly Hungary, the unrest against neoliberal policies that began in the 2000s was seen as a momentary reaction to the glitches of the transition process (Krastev, 2007). It was concluded that these movements did not pose a consistent ideological threat to the hegemonic supremacy of liberalism but rather used temporary problems arising during times of crisis against the global liberal order and its institutions as a pretext to declare war (Krastev, 2011). In this vein, studies on political movements within the right-wing conservative-nationalist spectrum, such as Fidesz and the Orbán regime, have focused less on the ideology and internal philosophical debates of these movements and more on investigating the structural factors and personal roles that elevate them, subjecting them to discourse analysis

and addressing the role of authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China in the growth of these movements (Mudde, 2004).

Studies examining the Orbán regime from the perspectives of comparative constitutional law, political economy, and political sociology agree on the appropriateness of terms such as "democratic regression," "authoritarianism," "populism," and "centralized corruption." These studies have pointed out that the regime's institutional structure aims to increase Orbán's sphere of power and is designed to facilitate a kleptocratic wealth distribution mechanism, but they have refrained from the idea that Fidesz draws on a consistent ideological background while mobilizing voters. Bozoki (2017), states that the Orbán regime has a post-ideological structure, does not have an ideological image in the conventional sense, and that what matters most to him is not political ideals but maximizing power. Bozoki (2015), emphasized that Orbán has an ideological discourse that is inconsistent with his own life and that he is capable of opportunistic, contradictory ideological maneuvers to expand his power. Magyar (2020) stated that the Orbán regime, which he defined with the concept of a mafia state, has no place for ideology, that it developed a discourse by gathering the characteristics of different right-wing authoritarian regimes, and that it aimed to cover up Orbán's real ambitions, which are the desire for power and money (Magyar and Madlovics, 2020). Mueller (2020) viewed Orbán's portrayal of himself as a "Christian Democrat" in the EU parliament as an effort to seek allies to reduce future objections to his authoritarian policies at home and stated that Orbán's critical position in the EU has nothing to do with ideological principles but is entirely focused on interests and power. Kreko (2014), meanwhile, stated that Orbán does not follow a specific ideology, but uses different ideologies as tools to achieve his own political and economic interests. In another article co-authored by Kreko and Enyedi, which labeled the Orbán regime as a "laboratory of illiberalism", they attributed Fidesz's electoral successes to an unfair electoral system, the weakness of the opposition, and Orbán's charismatic personality, attributing no role to ideology (Kreko and Enyedi, 2018). Zsuzsanna Szelenyi (2022) believed that Orbán did not have a consistent and organic ideology but rather copied international trends. Scheppele stated that the Fidesz government does not have a clear ideology, that Orbán is a leader who, like Trump, does not act on principles, that ideological rhetoric is used not because Orbán and his political allies believe in it, but to be consumed by the public, and that, in short, he has no ideal other than enriching his political circle (Hegedüs, Scheppele and Simon, 2019). Bartha, Boda, and Szikra (2020), who examined the social policies of Orbán's governments, stated that the social policies pursued by the government have conflicting ideological characteristics. Benedek (2021), who examined Orbán's anti-gender political discourse, stated that these policies were designed not along an ideological axis but with the aim of increasing votes.

3. A New Ideology: Nationalist Conservatism

Despite the pandemic crisis of 2019 and the broad-based alliance of opposition parties, what social scientists had anticipated did not materialize; Fidesz

won the 2022 elections, even increasing its vote share and number of parliamentary seats. As a result of this situation, where theoretical assumptions conflicted with current politics, analyses were conducted in the literature that did not attribute the political success of the Orban regime solely to authoritarian regime conditions, but rather examined how the regime works, whether it has an ideological basis, and if so, how this plays a role in increasing the regime's resilience to crises (Buzogany and Varga, 2019; 2020) Varga and Buzogany (2022), who examine the role of ideology in the success of the global right's opposition to liberalism, attempt to show that the attack on liberalism is fueled by two different intellectual sources. Dividing these into "revolutionary conservatism and nationalist conservatism," the authors include leaders such as Le Pen and Salvini in the former and point to the Orban regime as the pioneer of the latter. According to them, both conservative ideologies oppose liberalism's "economism" based on individual interest and fail to conceptualize "social solidarity" as a community issue on the individual-market plane, seeking instead to institutionalize politics through the community. This solidarity network does not encompass the whole of society; it involves increasing social spending on classes that are "deserving" of assistance, which is essential for the survival of the nation (Varga and Buzogany, 2022). In contrast, three fundamental differences have been identified between the two ideologies. The first is that revolutionary conservatives defend a more fundamental opposition to liberalism and socialism and view prehistoric myths as the basis for the nation's reconstruction. For nationalist conservatives, however, the search for national origins begins with Europe's Christian era. The second difference is the revolutionary conservatives' relatively positive approach to fascism. In contrast, nationalist conservatives, following Strauss and Voegelin, recommend distancing oneself from all modern ideologies and, in this sense, consider fascism to be a result of modernism, which they already consider problematic. Finally, revolutionary conservatives draw a relatively narrow line, advocating an anti-US foreign policy, while nationalist conservatives have a vision and defense of a Western civilization that encompasses all continents (Varga and Buzogany, 2022).

Nationalist conservatives believe that modernism and all its extensions, such as socialism or liberalism, have deprived society of a moral foundation. Therefore, they emphasize that politics must transform religious values into a social reality by reintegrating them with mechanisms of national allegiance. They carry a desire to find a spiritual root for society that comes from history (Varga and Buzogany, 2022). Varga and Buzogany (2022) have stated that the team preparing Orban's policy set has also drawn up such a strategy, and therefore they accept Fidesz as a model party. However, considering that the Orbán regime has a revolutionary opposition to liberalism and maintains close relations with Russia and Eurasian regimes in geopolitical terms, the analytical distinction made by Buzogany and Varga between two types of conservatism loses its meaning, as the Orbán regime can be an example of both types. Therefore, as will be shown below, although the Orban regime appears to be influenced by nationalist conservative

thought, it is necessary to refer to Hazony, who is considered the theorist of this idea, to understand the true depth of this appearance.

According to Yoram Hazony (2022), who wrote the theory of nationalist conservatism, while liberalism and socialism impose the same institutional structure on all nations in accordance with their own ideologies for international purposes, nationalist conservatism argues that each nation should develop a public administration approach appropriate to its own traditions. Hazony explains that Daniel Webster, the first politician to use the term "nationalist conservatism," chose this expression to convey that national independence and solidarity were at the heart of Anglo-American conservatism. Therefore, Hazony (2022), states that the main goal of today's nationalist conservatives is to end the occupation of individual freedom—the fundamental principle of every area of public/private life and instead place the national interest at the center of the political arena. Hazony, who evaluates the changes Orban has made in the legal and economic order as a practical example of this ideology, frequently visits Budapest to meet with Orban.

Another observation that the Orban regime has an effective and distinct ideology comes from Cooper. Cooper (2023) argues that Orban challenges not only domestic politics but also the understanding of foreign policy and diplomatic relations shaped by the ideological rules of liberalism, countering authors who define the regime as post-ideological. Therefore, Orban's ideology, defined by Cooper as "autocratic nationalism," contains a "counter-hegemonic" force in the Gramscian sense (Cooper, 2023).

Arguing that the Orban regime has a consistent ideology and that this plays a vital role in the regime's functioning, Enyedi (2023) states that the regime's ideological map emerges from the articulation of three different structures. The first of these is "illiberal conservatism" In describing illiberal conservatism, Enyedi paints a picture that, institutionally, opposes checks and balances and is hostile to free media and an independent judiciary. Socially, it is an ideology that prioritizes collective rights over individual rights and creates a social hierarchy rooted in a male-dominated family structure. The second ideological structure is "civilizational ethnocentrism." This expression defines the nation as a homogeneous ethno-cultural unity rather than a citizen-based political organization and legitimizes this ethnic foundation as civilizational. Finally, the structure that completes these two parts in the Orban regime is "paternalistic populism." Paternalistic populism refers to a legal regime focused not on the rights of citizens but on their duties to the state, and a social system that aims to support a broad population base consisting of middle-class, married, and child-rearing individuals through state intervention. Enyedi has stated that the Orban regime shapes its policies not out of concern for winning votes but based on an ideology inspired by these three structures (Enyedi, 2023).

Körösényi, Illés, and Gyulai (2023), on the other hand, argue that the Orban regime's policy set is determined solely by a utilitarian and opportunistic approach, while also emphasizing that defining the regime by adding various adjectives to conservatism and nationalism is not sufficiently explanatory. To understand the

regime, they start from the element of "realism," which they define as semi-ideological. According to them, realism as a semi-ideology accurately describes how the Orbán regime, in the form of "plebiscitary leader democracy," which is the institutionalized version of Weber's charismatic authority type, works (Körösényi, Illés, and Gyulai, 2023). This is because plebiscitary leader democracies have the ability to balance the conflict between the needs and characteristics of a country's democracy and the potential handicaps of authoritarian rule without causing political crises. For Hungary, this is reflected in Orban's ability to reconcile conflicting social classes through his charisma (Körösényi, 2018).

4. The Illiberalism Debate

Another concept used to define the ideology of the Orban regime is "illiberalism." First introduced by Zakaria in 1997 to describe the difficulty of post-communist countries in transition to embrace the pluralistic principles of democracy, this concept became quite popular after Orban used it in a political speech in 2014. In his speech, Orban rejected liberalism based solely on economic self-interest, which only considers competition with other members of society and is in the grip of individualism and moral nihilism. Instead, he stated that Hungary needs an illiberal democracy, like the non-liberal and even non-democratic Singapore, China, India, Turkey and Russia, which care for the whole of society through solidarity, are shining like stars on the international stage, and that Hungary also needs an illiberal democracy that is not liberal (Toth, 2014). Zakaria's anti-liberalism, which carries negative connotations, has been reinterpreted by Orban as a dominant concept that forms the ideological basis of his political program and as the umbrella term for a set of long-term solutions. In contrast, academic literature has not assessed illiberalism as a consistent ideology specific to the Orban regime.

The relationship between the Orban regime and illiberalism has become the subject of research in three different ways. The first form is a concept used to describe the extent to which the regime has moved away from liberal democracy, as defined by Zakaria (Bozoki, 2017; Müller, 2016; Rupnik, 2023; Nyssönen and Metsala, 2021; Uitz, 2015). The second is its use to indicate the emergence of a "new type of authoritarian regime" categorized to describe the rollback of liberal democracy through democratic means (Kreko, 2022; Heinrich, 2019). The third is its evaluation as a subcategory of populism, with the aim of describing the regime's attack on liberal institutions/laws/values (Dawson and Hanley, 2016; Pető, 2022; Pappas, 2016). The common point of all three approaches is that illiberalism is not accepted as a distinguishable ideology. In contrast, especially after the April 2022 Hungarian elections, with the increased interest in researching the ideological foundations of the regime, studies have been conducted on illiberalism as a new ideological universe. Laruelle (2022), argues that using illiberalism merely as an adjective attached to various political concepts makes it difficult to understand the concept, while defining it solely as anti-liberal is overly simplistic, claiming that it should be understood as a new ideology with its own internal consistency. Smilova

(2022), states that illiberalism should be considered a distinct ideology, drawing from different sources and geographies, and that it has a coherent ideological core. The third is focusing on the welfare of the nation-state. Drinoczi (2022) stated that the changes made by the Orban regime to the legal order were defined as illiberal constitutionalism; however, he noted that the content of this ideology, which gave the regime its name, had not been defined. He claimed that a dense ideological content consisting of ethnic nationalism, sovereignty, traditionalism, and heteronormative components shaped the regime's constitutional order.

Orban's purpose in describing the regime as illiberal in his Tusvanyos speech is to show the world that his political programs have solid ideological foundations. However, illiberalism is a tool used to demonstrate the regime's operating logic and therefore lacks any value to be defended as a concept. For this reason, illiberalism is perceived as an umbrella concept encompassing "everything that is not liberal" and suggests that the Orban regime acts with a pragmatic rather than an idealistic strategy. These considerations have led Orban to seek a new concept to define his regime. At the Tusvanyos camp in 2018, he defined the regime's ideology as "Christian democracy" and sought to reinforce this definition with anti-immigrant rhetoric, rejecting multiculturalism and globalization, and emphasizing characteristics based on the Christian family model (miniszterelnok.hu, 2018). At this point, it is important to carefully note the following: More important than the concept Orban uses to describe his regime is the fact that the ideological content these concepts point to was not well known before Fidesz came to power but was formed because of years of political and academic work by Hungary's most important intellectuals.

Since the early 1990s, Fidesz has developed close ties with both Hungary's conservative-nationalist intellectual circles and intellectuals who opposed the integration of conservatism into liberalism, influenced by Thatcher and Reagan on a global scale. Prior to Fidesz's election victory in 2010, the party underwent a long period of ideological preparation covering political, philosophical, cultural, and literary fields. Civil society and think tanks, religious foundations, and universities played an active role in building the party's infrastructure. Particularly between 2002 and 2010, despite being the main opposition party, Fidesz conquered the public sphere through a network of associations/foundations gathered under the name "citizen circles," ending the post-1989 left/liberal hegemony (Greskovits, 2020). In this way, as Enyedi (2023) points out, the Orban regime found answers to questions that an ideological movement needs to ask, such as "What should a virtuous life be like?", "What is the nature of a represented community?", and "What is the relationship between citizens and the state?", thus enabling it to make a claim on a universal scale. Orban clearly expressed this claim to universality in a speech he gave in Tusvanyos in 2018, saying, "Thirty years ago, we thought Europe was our future. Today, we believe we are Europe's future" (Kolozova and Milanese, 2023).

Fidesz's extraordinary efforts on the intellectual front have ensured that the party has a broad social base, enabling it to consolidate its core voters in every

social crisis. The reason why Fidesz has been able to continuously mobilize its voters despite the international backlash against its authoritarian policies since coming to power should be sought here. Therefore, attributing the electoral success of Orbán and his party primarily to the authoritarian regime and its practices obscures our understanding of the regime's public support. To unravel the secret of Fidesz's long-term success, we must focus on the institutional and intellectual structures that generate social consent.

Numerous studies have been published on how conservative and nationalist politics around the world have modeled themselves on the Orban regime. (Applebaum, 2025; Nagy, 2022). It has been observed that Orban has influenced the strategies and philosophy of right-wing politics in countries with quite different socio-economic, geopolitical, and political conditions, from Italy to France, from the US to Canada, from Israel to the UK. The quickest way to understand why Orban is an inspiring leader for the conservative/nationalist camp is to look at two speeches he has made on the international stage in recent times.

In August 2023, American conservative journalist Tucker Carlson interviewed Orban—the second time Carlson has done so in the last three years—and asked him what lies at the root of the opposition to Orban among liberal politicians and intellectuals around the world. Orban's response demonstrated how he uses the ideological/philosophical foundations of his regime in his political rhetoric. According to Orban, the difference between liberals and himself is not merely ideological; it has much deeper roots and is even anthropological. He emphasized that there is a fundamental difference between himself and liberals regarding human existence and its nature. According to Orban, liberals see their own egos as the most important thing in the world and interpret the nature they live in from an anthropocentric perspective. However, according to Orban, human nature is aware that there are things more sublime than one's own ego. These are God, nation, and family. He states that the Hungarian government rules the country not according to liberal notions, but according to principles they accept as sacred to human nature. He states that because it is governed by this principle, Hungary is the protector of "Christian European Civilization." According to Orban, the source of the liberals' reaction lies in the traditional interpretation of human existence and society. This is because liberals do not tolerate any challenge to the hegemony, they have established in the realm of thought and label free thinking about human nature and values as evil (About Hungary, 2023).

Orban spoke at the opening of the 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held annually in the US, describing his own experience of fighting against liberal hegemony. According to Orban, conservatives must clearly declare to society "what they are fighting for" against liberals. These are family, Christianity, and nation. Orban said that the liberal legal/institutional infrastructure prevents conservatives from discussing these issues, emphasizing that it is necessary to resort to family, national, and religious values to protect society on

issues such as gender and immigration, which he considers part of woke ideology. However, boldly declaring goals is not enough to achieve victory over liberals. Liberal methods must also be abandoned. This is because liberal institutions, language, and concepts also strive to reinforce leftist/liberal hegemony (miniszterelnok.hu, 2022).

As seen in both speeches, Orbán has transformed the philosophical foundations relied upon by regime ideologues into a political strategy. Unlike classic right-wing populist regimes, he opposes modernism and its understanding of the individual and society, rather than politicizing current issues within liberal democracy. Orbán's anti-liberal methodology, based on Voegelin, Strauss, and Schmitt, stands out in terms of determining strategy for conservative-nationalist politics on a global level.

5. Conclusions

Orbán recognized the importance of having a consistent ideology in political struggle at a very early stage and did not establish the party's political kitchen merely as a place where current issues were addressed but also worked to create a philosophical-historical foundation for conservative ideology. In particular, the regime's ideology was designed to create a political alternative to the crisis of neoliberalism after the 2008 crisis, which necessitated intellectual sovereignty for national sovereignty. The rise of the nation-state against the weakening of supranational institutions was accepted as the main theme, and an anti-globalization and anti-immigration line was chosen. Similarly, the economic upheavals experienced by society during Hungary's neoliberal transition and the crisis of the liberal economic order after 2008 gave rise to a "communitarian" and "paternalistic" politics. This ideology, which combines "national sovereignty" and "paternalistic communitarianism," aims to create a space that Roger Scruton refers to as "oikophilia" (Hörcher, 2023). Derived from the word "oikos," which Scruton chose because it means both home and family in Ancient Greek, oikophilia simply describes a personalized space. This space is a place where the people you love and need are, where human experiences take place, and where you can fight and die to rule. Scruton defines this place not as yours or mine, but as ours. According to Scruton (2019), the modern counterpart of oikophilia corresponds to the nation-state. Because the nation-state is the source of human virtues. According to Scruton (2017), the reason for this is that it is the political form most suited to human nature. The thinker states that maintaining a healthy balance between duties and rights is only possible within the nation-state model, while liberalism has lost its sustainability due to its universal ambitions that excessively expand rights. Believing that liberalism weakens the individual's loyalty to the nation-state and emotional attachment to the nation-state, Scruton (1990; 2019) wrote that the historical/sacred institutions that bind the individual to society were destroyed by the blow of left-liberal theocracy.

Scruton's influence on Fidesz's intellectual universe is not surprising. This is because Scruton has taken on the task of reminding us of the anti-liberal

principles that conservative ideology forgot after World War II. In this respect, he can be considered the founding father of the new nationalist-conservative ideology. Institutions shaping Fidesz's ideological universe, such as the Szabadeg Institute, Corvinus University, the Batthyány Lajos Foundation Institute and its extension, the Danube Institute, have incorporated Scruton's ideas and published works attempting to establish a link between Anglo-Saxon nationalist/conservatism and Hungary. Orbán, who personally admires Scruton, introduced him during his 2019 visit at, stating, "We learned from him that conservatism is an ideology," and praised Scruton's approach to the nation-state.

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