



## **Democratic decay and the violent extreme right: Hungary and Poland in comparative perspective**

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### **Introduction**

The last decade has seen a surge in far right political parties. From being reduced to the margins, they have become increasingly normalised virtually all across the world, moving from the ‘margins to the mainstream’ (Mudde 2019, p. 3-4; Hainsworth 2000). This trend has not been confined to the political arena but has been accompanied by a drastic increase in violence committed by extreme right groups and individuals, targeting ethnic and religious minorities and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Koehler 2016, p. 85; CTED 2020, p. 3).

The term far right is often defined as anti-system and can be divided into two categories: the radical right and the extreme right. The former accepts popular sovereignty and majority rule – the ‘essence of democracy’, whereas the latter opposes the democratic system altogether (Mudde 2019, p. 8). Because the far right is often seen as unequivocally anti-system, the rise of extreme right violence has been widely regarded as posing a serious threat to democracy. However, this is often stated without neither defining what type of democracy is being referred to, nor acknowledging that democracy comes in various forms and need not necessarily imply an inherent liberal element. Democracy can be seen as a scale moving from tyranny of the majority on the one end and liberal democracy on the other, instead of a strict dichotomy. Consequently, although far right violence is commonly understood as an anti-state phenomenon posing an existential threat to the state, some forms of violence actually operate in accordance with state interests, depending on where a state fits on that scale. This is quite aptly shown in the case of both Hungary and Poland, where the gradual move towards increasing authoritarianism has been accompanied, and perhaps even reinforced, by the rise of extreme right violence.

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether the rise of the violent extreme right<sup>1</sup> poses a genuinely existential threat to democracy. By assessing the violent far right in contemporary Hungary and Poland, this paper aims at refuting the common claim that far right violence per definition threatens the democratic system. This will be done by demonstrating how the violent far right can, on the contrary, act as a system-consolidating rather than system-threatening force, something that is dependent on the form of democratic system in which it operates.

This paper will be structured as to initially provide a short summary of the contemporary political climate in which the Hungarian and Polish violent far right exist. Due to limitations of space, it will not provide a detailed account of either the rise of the Hungarian and Polish far right or details about their respective political system, but instead provide an overview of their current state of affairs, acting as a foundation for the proceeding matter of inquiry. Thereafter, far and extreme right violence in Hungary will be presented, followed by the case of Poland, introduced in a similar manner. It should be noted that the extreme right in Hungary and Poland comes in various forms and differs widely in terms of ideological commitment, organisational structure and level of violence. It can be manifested in hate crime, vigilantism and sometimes terrorism<sup>2</sup>, all of which may sometimes overlap and need not always be physically violent (Mareš & Bjørge 2019, p. 10). It can nevertheless be seen as part of the broader far right phenomenon and will therefore be examined as such. Subsequently, the two cases will be attached to the broader discussion on the threat that extreme right violence poses to democracy. The paper will conclude with a summary of the findings.

## **Far Right Politics in Hungary and Poland**

From standing in the forefront of democratisation by undergoing substantial democratic reforms, both Hungary's and Poland's respective democracies have seen a steady decline in recent years, gradually moving closer to authoritarianism (Toomey 2018, p. 87; Przybylski 2018, p. 52).

In Hungary, the entry of Victor Órban and his party Fidezs in 2010, paved the way for a radical reformation of the constitution, including substantial curtailments of previously enshrined democratic and liberal core values, increased power of the Constitutional Court, strict regulations on public media

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<sup>1</sup> The term violent far right and violent extreme right will be used interchangeably and refers here to individuals or groups opposing democracy and using violence with an extreme right motive.

<sup>2</sup> Terrorism can be defined as “the systematic use of coercive intimidation, usually to service political ends. It is used to create and exploit a climate of fear among a wider target group than the immediate victims of the violence and to publicise a cause, as well as to coerce a target to acceding to the terrorists’ aims” (Wilkinson 2011, p. 17).

along with a strong emphasis on the Hungarian national identity as built on Christianity and Hungarian ethnicity. This transformation was enabled by the two-thirds supermajority won by the coalition of Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (Bozóki 2016, p. 92-93; László Pap & Śledzińska-Simon 2019, p. 80).

In August 2018, Fidesz secured a third consecutive term in power with second place captured by Jobbik, becoming the biggest challenger to Fidesz (Walker 2018; Deloy 2018, p. 1). Although Jobbik is placed further right than Fidesz on the political spectrum, the Fidesz government had by 2015 implemented eight out of ten of Jobbik's 10-point policy programme of changes deemed most urgent (Bozóki 2016, p. 90). Despite Fidesz' attempts to distance itself from Jobbik, mainly in terms of its anti-Semitism, it is not much that separates the two parties politically (Bozóki 2016, p. 106-107). During its years of reign, the Fidesz party has developed a climate characterised by far right and racist rhetoric alongside the toleration of far right violence and paramilitaries (Fekete 2016, p. 39; Iqbal 2015). Although the main target of the far right discourse in Hungary are the Roma who have been used as scapegoats culpable for all the social and political ills in the country, Orbán has also pursued an intense anti-Semitic campaign against the Jewish US-Hungarian George Soros (Mireanu 2013, p. 69; p. Minkenberg 2017, p. 29; Mudde 2019, p. 129).

In Poland, the national-conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) came to power with the 2015 elections by winning 51% of the mandates in the lower chamber, making it a single-party majority government (Przybylski 2018, p. 52; László Pap & Śledzińska-Simon 2019, p. 80). As compared to Fidesz, PiS does not have the supermajority necessary to change the constitution. However, this has been made possible by claims of constitutional interpretation and disregarding the Supreme Law (László Pap & Śledzińska-Simon 2019, p. 68). Soon after taking office, PiS introduced a number of laws that radically challenged the liberal order, including the judiciary, the control of public media, civil service and other public institutions (Bill 2020, p. 1). Because PiS is closely tied to the Catholic Church, it has amplified the notion of Polish identity as one based on Catholicism and traditional core values such as the nation and the family, deeming them crucial for the state and its survival (Gwiazda 2020). As such, the PiS perceives the LGBTQ+ community as a demoralising and dangerous threat to the national identity. Although the PiS claims that the nation is not defined in an ethnic sense, their resistance towards immigration, and anti-Semitic beliefs among some of its party members suggests the opposite (Folvarčný & Kopeček 2020, pp. 172-173).

Both regimes have used the law as a tool for their respective political interests and the strengthening of control over public media, civil service and judiciary. Moreover, by proposing

reforms as private members' bills, the ruling parties have been able to circumvent conventional legislative procedures and cement their power. Their parliamentary majority has been considered the absolute source of authority and has ensured power of the respective ruling governments. Although the constitutional judiciary remains in theory, courts have been appointed with politicians loyal to the ruling parties, hence neutralising the effect of checks and balance mechanisms (László Pap & Śledzińska-Simon 2019, p. 66-68). The ruling parties of both Hungary and Poland can be seen as radical right, as they do not unequivocally disregard the democratic system as such but still have democratic elections and majority rule<sup>3</sup>. They can also be seen as populist to some extent, in their shared scepticism towards the European elite, as well as in their view of politics as expressing the general will of 'the people', that is, the homogenous majority group (Mudde 2019, p. 8).

## **Hungary**

One of the first far right paramilitary groups in contemporary Hungary was the Hungarian Guard, formed in 2007 as an offspring of the Jobbik party but later evolved into an umbrella group for various far right subgroups connected by the same set of converging ideas and beliefs (Mireanu 2013, p. 75; LeBor 2008, p. 34). The group was formed to not only defend and protect the Hungarian nation, but also the moral, culture and historical identity of ethnic Hungarians (Minkenberg 2017, p. 78; Mireanu 2013, p. 74). The main target was originally Jews, but later shifted to a new perceived security threat - the Roma population. The Hungarian Guard was ultimately banned in 2009 but reemerged as the 'New Hungarian Guard' along with a number of other far right paramilitary organisations (Mireanu 2013, p. 76).

During the spring of 2011, uniformed paramilitary groups frequently patrolled the streets in Roma-inhabited villages to protect the local ethnic Hungarian population from 'Gypsy terror' (Mireanu 2013, p. 78). After throwing rocks at Roma houses, violence ultimately erupted between the paramilitary and the Roma. What was supposed to be the 'control of public order' ended with a violent clash, forcing almost 300 Roma to be evacuated. The government later claimed that the evacuation was staged by political opponents (BBC News 2011). Although most of the new far right groups claim to be non-aggressive units operating to maintain public order, their marches in Roma villages have provoked violence and instilled widespread fear in the Roma community (Mareš & Tvrdá 2014, p. 12).

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<sup>3</sup> Although this may be debatable in the case of Hungary, as elections are perhaps free, but not necessarily fair, after the reformation of the constitution.

Other groups include the ‘Outlaw Army’, a strategic partner of Jobbik, that explicitly believes in the use of violence with its leader urging its supporters to kill Jews, Roma and people of colour (Leaning et al. 2014, p. 25). The Association for a Better Future Civil Guard is another paramilitary-like group targeting the so-called ‘Gypsy terror’. Because of its extreme right ideology, the group has been linked to the New Hungarian Guard and Jobbik. The Hungarian National Front is the most organised extreme right group in Hungary, with its members receiving training for combat (Leaning et al. 2014, p. 25-26). The Hungarian Arrows National Liberation Army was another group active between 2007 and 2009. The group was responsible for attacking socialist and liberal politicians with Molotov cocktails, arson attacks on houses, attacking journalists and firebombing places frequently visited by the LGBTQ+ community. The attacks were mainly carried out to instil fear and were supported with statements on their extreme right agenda (Mareš 2018, p. 128-129).

The most serious violence carried out by right-wing extremists in Hungary, was a series of attacks targeting Roma as well as a refugee camp between 2008 and 2009 by a group labelled the ‘Death Squad’ by the media. The group was responsible for killing six people and injuring another 55 (Mareš 2016, p. 81-83). Non-confirmed sources claim that the purpose of the attacks was to provoke an uprising from the Roma, ultimately leading to an ethnic race war (Mareš & Tvrdá 2014, p. 12). In February 2009, the group set fire to a house owned by a Roma family and later shot the family when they attempted to escape. The mother and daughter of the family survived the attack but suffered serious injuries whereas the father and son died (Mareš 2011, p. 244). When police arrived at the scene, they tried to prevent the family from reporting the attack. Moreover, the group had help from at least one additional person, yet no effort was made in investigating these connections. The public reaction to these brutal acts of violence were minimal and the government remained silent without condemning the attack or paying tribute to the victims<sup>4</sup> (Verseck 2013). The attitude among politicians, police, emergency personnel and investigators following the attack indicated a strong bias. Simultaneously, extreme right nationalists praised the violence as acts of heroism, serving to clear the nation from criminals (Subert 2019, p. 10-12). The violence by the so-called Death Squad was preceded by a series of extreme right demonstrations and in Roma villages characterised not by explicit and physical violence but racist rhetoric and was defended by virtue of freedom of speech (Subert 2019, p. 8). The

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<sup>4</sup> Eight years after the first murder, the Minister for Human Resources, and not Victor Orbán, apologised on behalf of the previous government. Responsibility was partly taken for the questionable behaviour of the police as well as the deficient investigation efforts. However, no responsibility was taken for the widespread racism and anti-Roma attitudes thriving in the country (Subert 2019, p. 15-16).

Death squad, the patrolling of Roma villages and the organised anti-Roma marches are not the only forms of violence affecting the Roma. Other incidents have included threatening letters, racist slurs and houses set on fire. There have also been other shootings, reports of Roma being followed by members of paramilitary groups and threatened with weapons and dogs, all without police intervention (Leaning et al. 2014, p. 29-36).

## **Poland**

The Polish extreme right scene is not as well-organised and coordinated as its Hungarian counterpart but is of a less coherent character with sporadic violent episodes. As of 2007, the extreme right does not have any formal parliamentary representation. Instead, the Law and Justice party have incorporated much of its beliefs and voters (Pankowski 2012, p. 3).

In Poland, as in many other countries, there is no clear boundary separating the extreme right, the populist right and the mainstream right. They nevertheless share a strong ultra-Catholicism, anti-pluralism, a homogenous view of national identity and the rejection of liberal democratic principles (Minkenberg 2017, p. 86; Pankowski & Kormak 2013, p. 157). Some of the most prominent far right organisations in Poland are All-Polish Youth, National-Radical Camp and National Rebirth of Poland, all of which resort to violence albeit to varying degrees (Minkenberg 2017, p. 79). The most active and prominent one is the National-Radical Camp, mainly operating at street level as a youth movement under various branches. Except one group associated with the National-Radical Camp being banned, their activities have remained largely unhindered (Pankowski 2012, p. 3).

Since the introduction of the annual Independence March in 2011 organised by extreme right groups, the number of participants has not only increased but so too have the racist offences. The marches have spurred violent riots taking right-wing violence to a new level (Minkenberg 2017, p. 95). The 2011 Independence Day march in Warsaw, organised by the All-Polish Youth and the National-Radical Camp attracted thousands of participants. During the parade, participants carried racist symbols of ‘white power’, chanted offensive slurs and racist slogans such as ‘Whole Poland, all White!’. The march resulted in turmoil on the streets along with significant damage to people and property (Pankowski & Kormak 2013, p. 163). Despite the marches being held by radical and extreme right groups, increasingly characterised by racist rhetoric, violence and participants dressed in uniforms, combat boots and racist symbols, the Polish president, Andrzej Duda, encouraged people to attend

the 2019 March, which he himself not only attended but also gave the opening speech and later marched alongside other government members (Ciobanu 2019).

A parallel march was organised by the National Rebirth of Poland (NOP), held in Wroclaw the same day, called the “march of Patriots”, to which an MP of the PiS had posted an invitation on his website. The march displayed similar forms of violence as well as racist and neo-Nazi logos, slogans and slurs (Pankowski & Kormak 2013, p. 163). During the same march the following year, participants threw rocks and firecrackers at by-passers, without intervention from the police. After the parade, dozens of men armed with sticks and bats attacked a group of squatters. Their building was vandalised, and Molotov cocktails and rocks were thrown at its windows. Three squatters were severely hurt, one of whom almost died from his injuries. The leader of the National Rebirth of Poland later praised the attack and the PiS never denounced the attack but seemed to silently approve of it (Pankowski & Kormak 2013, p. 166-167; Ost 2018, p. 123).

Similar patterns of violence have occurred in connection to various extreme right marches and demonstrations. For years, participants of the Independence Day march in Warsaw burned an installation representing gay pride and in Warsaw in 2012, the office of ‘Lamda’, an LGBTQ+ nongovernmental organisation was vandalised with stones and bottles. A police officer told a Lambda member that the attack would not have taken place had they not ‘flaunted their sexuality’ (Pankowski & Kormak 2013, p. 163). In 2017, the PiS Minister of Internal Affairs was confronted with a list of the participants shouting racist slogans during these marches and reacted by saying it was a ‘beautiful sight’ (Ost 2018, p. 123). In January 2019, Pawel Adamowicz, a critic of the PiS and supporter for LGBTQ+ rights and asylum seekers was stabbed to death. He had been subject to hate and threats from Polish far right circles and the year prior to the murder, the All-Polish Youth had issued a fake ‘political death certificate’ for the politician, the cause of death stated as ‘liberalism, multiculturalism and stupidity’ (Easton 2019).

Between 1990 and 2000, people associated with the extreme right were responsible for killing 20 people and injuring 153. Most of these killings took place spontaneously when ‘enemies’ accidentally clashed with groups of skinheads (Platek & Plucienniczak 2016, p. 134). Hostile homophobic rhetoric has intensified and the number of violent attacks on ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ+ community and socialist politicians has increased. In 2011, the Never Again association registered 300 cases of hate speech, attacks on ethnic minorities, members of the LGBTQ+ community and vandalism against religious minorities. However, very few of these incidents have caught the attention and interest of politicians (Platek & Plucienniczak 2016, p. 122).

## Discussion

Both Hungary and Poland have evidently moved far from the liberal side of the political spectrum towards increasingly illiberal and authoritarian regimes. Noteworthy is that these illiberal shifts have been facilitated by democratically elected governments. Orbán has with pride described Hungary as an ‘illiberal democracy’ and PiS, although not explicitly using the term ‘illiberal democracy’, has endorsed most of Fidesz’ strategies to erode the Polish liberal constitution (László Pap & Śledzińska-Simon 2019, p. 66). These parties have, with their parliamentary majority, managed to move close to establishing a form of ethnocracy, dominated by one ethnic group (Mudde 2019, p. 116). This has been manifested not only in members of the leading parties’ rhetoric but also in their reformed constitutions and party programmes, characterised by a strong emphasis on the national identity built on a common historical legacy, ethnicity and Christianity rather than tied together as a political community (László Pap & Śledzińska-Simon 2019, p. 66). The notion of identity is crucial in order to understand how the two states may have approved of, and more importantly, benefitted from, the violent far right. The constructed notion of national identity common to both Hungary and Poland leaves no room for ethnic, cultural or religious minorities and can be seen as a mechanism of controlling behavioural norms as well as a tool of dehumanising minority groups whilst underscoring the superiority of the ethnic majority population. Because the narrative is portrayed with an implicit notion of relational antagonist out-groups and protagonist in-groups, being simultaneously Roma, Jewish or LGBTQ+ and Hungarian respectively Polish becomes impossible (Kundnani 2012, p.8).

Common to both liberal and more illiberal states is the state’s primary function and responsibility of protecting its people. The difference lies in who is considered the ‘people’. In liberal democracies, the people are commonly recognised as a heterogeneous group but are nevertheless, by virtue of being human beings, entitled to human rights and their uncompromisable protection. In Hungary and Poland, anyone who falls short of the narrow boundaries of what constitutes the national identity becomes excluded from what is seen as the people. Such an illiberal democratic system undoubtedly forges a ‘tyranny of the majority’ (Tocqueville 1838, p. 346), but for states that do not consider the minority a part of the people but rather as posing a threat to the majority, such tyranny is of little concern and exploiting it becomes necessary. Because the out-group is not part of the people, they are perceived as an internal threat to the nation, the people and their identity, hence not worthy of the state’s protection but rather seen as a group to be protected from. The biggest threat in the eyes of the Hungarian and Polish extreme right has been the Roma respectively the LGBTQ+



community. They have in the rhetoric of both the ruling parties and the extreme right been depicted as criminals or in other ways illegitimate threats to the stability and security of the nation. Hence, the increasing extreme right violence in Poland, especially targeting the LGBTQ+ community that are said to be ‘paedophilias’, propagating under-age sex and gay adoption (Savage 2020), has been seen as a legal and legitimate response to the perils of their existence in a state based on Catholic and traditional family values (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała 2019, p. 1158). The same can be said about the vigilante activities conducted in Roma-populated areas in Hungary. Because the Roma minority is framed within a discourse of ‘crime’ and ‘terror’, combating them becomes not only legitimate but also encouraged by the state. Along these lines, violent groups attacking and threatening these ‘criminal communities’ may be portrayed as committing heroic acts by providing security for the greater population.

In relation to this, the visual aspect of the violent far right may also serve to strengthen the state, the national identity and reinforce pride in the historical legacy by acting as a symbol of masculinity, patriotism and honour, representing the glorious past that both Fidesz and PiS praise highly (Kondor & Littner 2020; 126-129; Hackman 2018). After all, what could be more patriotic than voluntarily sacrificing oneself for the security and protection of one’s country? Moreover, Mireanu (2013) suggests that this can be seen as the ‘spectacle of security’, serving to blur the lines between describing the world and creating it (p. 89). Thus, the visual performance made by extreme violent groups, and their ability to provoke counter-violence from the out-group can serve to create and enhance an illusion of already existing beliefs, along with a perceived sense of community and security amongst the in-group. This plays in the hands of Fidesz and PiS by sowing further societal divisions whilst simultaneously working to unite the majority under one common ethnicity against one common threat.

In addition, the public narrative produced by Fidesz and PiS is built upon a highly securitised discourse, with an intrinsic logic framing the ‘us’ as being under imminent and serious threat by the defined ‘them’. This fuels a sense of fear among the in-group which makes resorting to violence inevitable in order to defeat and ultimately eliminate the threat posed by Roma, Jews or members of the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, violence becomes legitimised in the name of self-defence. This can be exemplified by a statement made by Gabor Vona, the founder of Jobbik, when he compared the ‘Gypsy issue’ to a situation of civil war (Leaning et al. 2014, p. 27). In a similar fashion, Jarosław Kaczyński, the chairman of PiS has claimed that ‘[t]here is a battle for the future of Poland [,]...our civilisation, our culture, its existence’ (Tilles 2020). Under a perceived situation like that of war there

is a clear divide between those who need protection and those against whom protection is needed. Had Hungary and Poland been liberal democracies, undoubtedly the tolerance of far right violence would undermine the credibility of the state in terms of its duty to protect its people and their fundamental human rights. But evidently, this is not in the interest of states built on a perception of the people as a homogenous people, defined by its relation to the ‘other’.

Although paramilitaries, vigilantes and other groups using violence or the threat of violence challenge the state’s monopoly of legitimate use of violence (Weber 1919, 2007, p. 334), they can be interpreted as a covert, extended arm of the state or an informal outsourcing of the legitimate use of legitimate violence, when acting in accordance with its political interests (e.g., Schubert 2013). Moreover, even if not necessarily violent, their mere presence, often dressed in uniforms, combat boots and racist symbols, accompanied with dogs on leash, works to terrorise and instil fear in their target groups (Mudde 2019, p. 92-93). Furthermore, extreme right groups acting as vigilantes can serve to enforce behavioural norms and prevent the out-group from straying from the norm or suppress them outright. By sowing fear in minority communities and silencing opposition, the violence from the extreme right can serve to benefit both Fidesz and PiS, whilst denying them any agency in the acts. This has been observed in places like Indonesia, where neighbourhood watches benefited the state by being an inexpensive way of facilitating control over local public order and generating a police-like citizenry (Telle 2013, p. 189; Barker 2007, p. 89). This was also manifested during the Hong Kong protests, where police seemingly embraced gangs attacking peaceful protesters (Pomfret & Kwok 2019). The same pattern can be observed in vigilante activities in the US stretching back to the 17th and 18th century where vigilantes have frequently cooperated with police and authorities (Hofstadter p. 204).

In the wake of the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015, Orbán attracted public attention by erecting a razor-wire-topped fence at its Serbian borders, patrolled by soldiers authorised to use deadly force in order to prevent refugees from entering the country, firmly contending that non-Christian refugees would not be offered asylum and claiming that people fleeing the Middle East were economic migrants and terrorists (Traub 2015; TUC 2020, p. 3). Consequently, the paramilitary group Outlaw’s Army reportedly patrolled the border to hunt down migrants (Fedeke 2016, p. 42). Interestingly, a strikingly similar situation took place in the US during the Trump presidency when militias patrolled the Mexican border under cooperation with US border patrol agents (BBC News 2019). Although the US is a liberal democracy, heavily treasuring its liberal values, Trump undoubtedly flirted with more illiberal principles (Boyle 2020). Tentatively, this could suggest that the toleration, and sometimes

support of violence, depends on where a country is placed on the hypothetical scale of tyranny of the majority on the one end and liberal democracy on the other. Evidently, even in an allegedly liberal democracy such as the US, the violent far right can prove beneficial when acting in accordance with the interests of the state governed by a right-wing president.

Although it remains beyond the boundaries of possibility to draw any straightforward direct causal relationship between the success of the political far right in Hungary and Poland and the violent extreme right groups in the two countries, one could argue that they are mutually reinforcing. While the leading parties and the subsequent mainstreaming of far right beliefs could have enabled and permitted different violent movements to emerge and operate (Bjørge 1995, p. 2), the violent extreme right can strengthen Fidesz and PiS by doing the 'dirty work' for them, whilst divorcing them from any involvement. Regardless of how authoritarian a leader is, there might be certain forms of behaviour that are beyond the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable. Power may be cemented by reforming the constitution, opinion of opposition may be silenced by stricter public media legislation and minorities may be stripped of their rights but actually deploying violence to terrorise opposition and minorities may be deemed as crossing a limit. However, by means of silent approval or vague condemnation, the extreme right groups can take on that job, and the state can keep their hands clean. Remaining silent about the violence may also be a strategic choice made not to lose voters to parties even further to the right on the political spectrum. In addition, even if sometimes causing turmoil and destruction, allowing extreme right groups to march on the streets may be a mechanism of propaganda, letting the extreme right groups publicly propagate their far right sentiments, which may push the public into supporting a more radical agenda serving the leading parties, but which they cannot personally afford to express in order not to lose more moderate voters. Extreme right groups arguably need not care for such consequences.

Thus, while paramilitarism, vigilantism and other forms of extreme right violence is typically seen as threatening the system, it can serve as an intentional mechanism to consolidate the state by reconstructing the relationship between citizens, the state and conventional societal norms. It can serve to deepen the social divides between the in-group and out-group and work to enhance the political construct of national identity. Moreover, it blurs the lines between judicial and extrajudicial force and can normalise disciplinarian behaviour among citizens which could also be a way to create and attract wide public support and anchor the desire and glorification of a strong state. When revealing the potential advantages of extreme right violence, its relation to the Hungarian and Polish state and its impact on minority groups, it could also, albeit perhaps controversially, be seen as a form

of terrorism. If stretching the definition of terrorism, as done by Heitmeyer (2005), to also include the subjective side of the target group being put in a permanent state of fear, some violence carried out by extreme right groups, vigilantes, youth gangs or other loosely organised groups may meet the criteria of terrorism (p. 144). Hence, when approved, tolerated, and sometimes even encouraged by the state in order to support or achieve the political objectives of the ruling parties, either in terms of controlling a minority, silencing opposition, or simply maintaining the status quo, it could be interpreted as state-supported terrorism, something that makes its system-consolidation impact even more evident.

Because the violent extreme right may successfully threaten the right to life and freedom of minorities, silence opposition, challenge the legitimacy of the state and push the political agenda towards a more authoritarian direction, it can indeed be considered a threat to liberal democracy (Mudde 2019, p. 115). However, in democracies with increasingly illiberal and authoritarian tendencies, such as Hungary and Poland, the role of the violent far right does not threaten the political establishment but rather seeks to maintain status quo, along the lines of the ruling parties. Thus, it is not as much the violent extreme right that threatens democracy but more that beliefs shared by a large section of the population represented by an elected government may eventually serve to erode even an illiberal democratic system from within.

## **Conclusion**

What this paper has argued is that contrary to common belief, extreme right violence does not necessarily pose a genuinely existential threat to the state or the democratic system but can act as a reinforcing mechanism facilitating the success of far right governments and the securing of their hegemonic position, something that is crucially dependent on the political system in which it operates. This becomes painfully evident in the case of Hungary and Poland, whose ruling parties have taken great advantage of extreme right groups in order to advance their political agenda. However, this is not to say that the extreme right poses less of a threat to minorities and other groups targeted by its violence. Rather the opposite. For a state built on the narrow perception of national identity as one tied together by a common ethnicity, historical legacy and Christianity - a perception deeply rooted in a fear of being replaced by a group seen as inferior - its survival becomes utterly dependent on constructing an enemy, a process in which the extreme violent right arguably helps fuel. However, such a construct might be a fragile foundation on which to build a strong state.

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