

## **POLITICIZED, DE-POLITICIZED, RE-POLITICIZED<sup>1</sup>**

### **Comparing Taiwan and Hungary**

#### **Abstract**

Whereas the development of democracy in Taiwan since the late 1980s onwards exemplifies a joint evolution of political nation-building and civic consciousness, roughly the same period in Hungary is an instance for both the construction and the de-construction of a liberal democracy. In the first case the democratic development emerged from the outdated one-party military rule of the nationalist Kuomintang. In the second case we are dealing with the raise of illiberal political forces in the midst of growing social tensions which have gradually undermined the continuation of a still fragile liberal democracy. Whereas Taiwan exemplifies a typical grass-root evolution of emerging civic democracy, the short-lived Hungarian liberal democracy had been created by the „elites” of the post-state-socialist early 1990s and imposed by the alliance between the post-state-socialist reformists, and the emerging liberal and conservative elites. In this environment the grass-root element in Hungary after 1990 has ended up weak, and the democratization process has turned into an illiberal regime, explicitly proclaimed and carried out by the government that rules since 2010, winning three consecutive re-elections. The present paper raises the issue of comparing the role of apolitics and politically engaged citizenship in the evolution of political mentality in Hungary and in Taiwan since the early nineties onwards. The comparison consists of the mapping of concepts and phenomena related to the relationship between politicization, de-politicization and re-politicization in the process of democratization. As an interpretive attempt the paper offers a dichotomy between freedom as participation and freedom as escape as possible responses toward politics. We can also observe that the interplay of politics and apolitics is a dynamic one in so far as institutional politics may be interested to “colonize” civil politics, de-politicizing and re-politicizing it, and de-politicization also occurs on the international scale. The analysis embraces topics like collective memory, freedom of information as well political history and cultural legacy, all of them as fields where the instances of participation and escape are relevant.

#### **Introduction**

Taiwan represents one of the corners of the world where the chances of democracy to survive are intensively undergoing a test. The success of the Euro-Atlantic “free world” to defend peace and democracy in the Taiwan strait region will also indicate its capability to do the same in other parts of the world. One of the main areas of this struggle is the free flow of information both in the sense of self-defense against disinformation and the protection of the media against attempts of interference primarily from the People’s Republic of China. Whereas some aspects

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is the outcome of my research between February and May 2024 that I carried out as Taiwan MOFA Fellow in Taipei, at Soochow University, School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, as well as in the National Library. This paper will be first published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan).

of these pursuits don't differ fundamentally from their presence in other regions of the world, the Taiwanese context also displays specific elements of research interest. In Taiwan the problem of disinformation and press freedom emerge in an environment where a liberal and an illiberal regime intersect on the overall media market, sharing the meantime common features of market, language and collective memory.

Uneven trajectories of social developments may be more indicative for the functioning of various interpretive models than any perfect match between developments and models aimed to explain them. Hence the importance of exceptions and of marginal cases in social science. An example is the claim in the scholarship on Taiwan that the end result of a social development may be the outcome of modernization as imposed by external or internal political pressure rather than an organic cause coming from the society. Moreover, what one calls development may even show in the opposite direction, if it consolidates non-modern patterns (Gilley, 2008, pp. 9, 10, 18; Yun-cha, 2008, pp. 38-48). In the twentieth century modernization in Taiwan started as an imposed improvement of the state administration, public sector, economy, education and local government practices (first during the Japanese occupation), but later it was carried on as the self-development of an emerging grass-root democracy.

In case of Hungary the uneven trajectory has been the gradual de-construction since 2010 of a liberal democracy still in its infancy (emerging only from the late 1980s onwards), and its replacement with a self-proclaimed illiberal regime.<sup>(1)</sup> Although the involution of liberal democracy has taken place in all post-state-socialist countries of Central- and Eastern Europe to different degrees, Hungary displays certain unique elements in this process.<sup>2</sup> As the only functioning democracy in the overall Chinese political landscape Taiwan is also unique.

The present tract raises the issue of comparing the role of apolitical elements in the evolution of political mentality in Hungary and in Taiwan from the last three-and-half decades. The comparison consists of the mapping of narratives and phenomena which display the early overlaps and later the diverging evolution of the two political environments. The role of the dichotomy between politics and apolitics in the understanding of these parallel processes consists in the various patterns of participation and escape in attitudes toward politics. The concepts involved demand a brief overview of the related scholarship.

The conceptual clarification which focuses on the fundamental issue of the paper: political participation and its refusal, is first followed by a general presentation of the path of Hungary toward liberal democracy and its abandoning it, as well as by some major examples meant to illustrate Hungarian politics and its communication by the government abroad. General historical similarities between the two nations will also be identified briefly.

---

<sup>2</sup> In the following I am using the labels "state-socialist" and "communist" in the following understanding. Whereas "communist" was meant ideologically as the ultimate realization of the socialist regimes, the actual character of these regimes were one-party-ruled state-socialisms.

## Conceptual Clarification

To address the concept of the apolitical involves the addressing of the concept of the political too. As a self-relying concept, *the political* was influentially coined by Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, (1932) 1996, p. 53; Schwab, 1996, p. 7). The relevance of this concept for the present tract is that its central concept is *the apolitical* as well as related concepts like antipolitics, de-politicization, participation and escape from participation. The paper takes the complementary nature of the two basic concepts as well as the related ones for granted. The complementary, the two basic pairs of concepts also, appears in Schmitt's work (Schmitt, (1932) 1996, pp. 21, 22, 24, 25, 32, 35, 38, 62). The problem of the apolitical (and of the political) is applied in the present paper in a comparative analysis of political mentality.

Despite its fundamentally, negative stance toward politics the phenomenon of the apolitical is integral part of the political landscape of a society. It gains space inside politics, whereas it is fundamentally outside of it. The basic claim of this paper is that apolitical phenomena and narratives function as politically relevant elements of the overall political environment: apolitics is a political phenomenon. This claim can be supported for instance by the fact, that apolitical attitudes are also important in the development of alternative political movements (Jasper, 1997, p. 34).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in case of a major loss of electoral support of both the governmental and the oppositional side, critically apolitical agendas may become more important than any agenda offered by the party spectrum. Surveys testify the potential of apolitical masses in the emerging of radicalism (Reckwitz, 2019, p. 275). These phenomena indicate the dynamism by which apolitical attitudes function as parts of the overall political landscape.

In the scholarship on apolitics Hindess argues that no universal typology of the concept of the apolitical is possible, because all its understandings are only meaningful in relation to some specific understanding of the concept of the political in the first place. Hindess describes in this respect both orientations as suitable for a more or less autonomous range of action of a community, from which he deduces that apolitics and politics always appear in a mutually meaningful relation (Hindess, 1996, pp. 21, 23). The present tract follows this assumption by emphasizing the necessary correspondence between any specific understanding of politics, on the one hand, and an understanding of apolitics as related to it, on the other hand.

Schedler offers a typology which is more detailed than that of Hindess. He distinguishes between four types of these which describe the nature of what in his vocabulary is equivalent to the antipolitical: 1. instead of collective issues, the thesis identifies some self-orienting order; 2. instead of plurality, it identifies uniformity; 3. instead of accidentalism, it identifies necessity; 4. instead of political power, it identifies individual liberty. According to Schedler, each eliminates one fundamental political aspect: 1. the recognition of the interdependence among the individuals of a community by the constituting individuals themselves; 2. the recognition

---

<sup>3</sup> James M. Jasper distinguishes between three key factors behind any act of social resistance: 1. the alteration of the options offered by the political environment; 2. the level of organization of a particular movement; 3. the positive perspectives of the given community. This classification corresponds to the present interpretation of reflective apoliticism as a potential in the emerging of movements.

of the plurality of the constituting individuals; 3. their capacity for joint action; 4. the possibility of the acceptance of a common rule. Schedler links the private sphere to the apolitical and the public to the political one, and claims that the primary code of politics always emerges from the opposition between the private and the public (Schedler, 1996, pp. 3-4). He describes the apolitical as non-cooperative and the political as cooperative enterprise. This brings us to the topic of the present tract: the understanding of the apolitical and its interaction with the political with special focus on the instances of participation and escape in the addressed comparative analysis between Hungary and Taiwan since the early 1990's onwards.

One of the possible ways of modeling the interaction between the apolitical and the political is to place them into a cooperative scheme. As Weller highlights, under certain conditions civil society may become interested to cooperate with the political power for a better realization of its own agenda. However, this strategy runs the risk of the weakening of the civil society's potentially critical stance toward the government. This is what the author calls responsive authoritarianism (Weller, 2008, pp. 117-125).

This attitude implies the paradox of the turning of apolitical potentials into political ones: integrated into a cooperative scheme, civil actors may be interested to cease to remain political in their autonomous commitments and possible resistance to major political actors (government, parties, foundations etc.), and become in this way apolitical with regard, to their own goals. Major political actors can detect and use (or abuse) the civic politics against itself by inviting it for cooperation. This can take the form of offering of funds, assets, consulting, i.e. material and intellectual assistance that civil organizations might need. However, this cooperation might weaken the autonomy and ultimately the critical potential of civil actors. By diminished agenda, civil society may become virtually apolitical with regard, to its own initial purposes and loyal to the power agenda. Meanwhile the interest of the power to invite for cooperation is to achieve more control and diminish civic autonomy and resistance.

Weller disregards however that the ultimate pattern of this interplay between major political actors (primarily the government) and civil society is what one could label as "de-politicizing by re-politicizing". This means that by undermining autonomous civic commitments the power both de-politicizes their own politics and attaches them to its own politics: this is re-politicization.

The Hungarian and generally central-European understandings of the concept of the apolitical supply with starting points both for their implementation in other political environments and can be subjected to conceptual amendments themselves in light, of phenomena supplied by other environments. In the present analysis the space and time for this comparison is Hungary and Taiwan from the late 1980's and the early 2010's, with some of its aspects to the present. The closer Hungarian and Central-European scholarship of the concept of apolitics serves us the following considerations.

In his work *Antipolitics*, George Konrad distinguishes between antipolitics – as the civic rejection of the politics embedded in the core institutions of the state (regime or establishment) and apolitics – as the indifference toward politics as such (Konrad, pp. 227-233). Konrad describes antipolitics as a politically unbiased civic attitude which seeks distance from the

establishment and protection of one's own private life against politics.<sup>4</sup> In his reconstruction of the history of political ideas of these state-socialist countries and of their development after the end of the state-socialist regimes in 1989, Miklós Tamás Gáspár elaborates that the post-fascist turn in these countries (with various degrees), emerged from the erosion of an earlier understanding of the of equality of rights in the 2000s. He argues that in this process of the disappearance of civic equality, citizenship has become apolitical and has led to an uncritical political environment (Tamás, 2014, p. 24; Tamás, 2015, pp. 28-42). With regard to the interpretations of apoliticism in Central Europe after 1989, Charles Fairbanks also identifies a connection between apoliticism and the development of these societies (Fairbanks, 1996, pp. 91-114, 103-105). He interprets this apoliticism as a grotesque outcome of the over-polarization of everyday life during the one-party rules of the pre-1989 period. The void left behind by those communist dictatorships has been filled up by nationalism inspired from a Jacobin understanding of the "people", already inexistent in Western societies. Contrary to this, the Western version of apoliticism is to be found in the "single issue" movements (Fairbanks, 1996, p. 112). It worth noticing that this Western-type of issue-based civic activism is in the present more typical for Taiwan than for Central- and Eastern Europe.

Kivisto and Scortino identify the power strategy of bargaining with citizen to obtain their political-civic passivity in an East-Asian context (Kivisto, Scortino, 2019, p. 290). The present paper underscores the global rather than regional and national character of this sought of deal as a road toward de-politicizing society. Their observation is consistent with the one from above, that there may be power interests in de-politicization of citizen undertakings, which can be seen as a form of "producing" apoliticism – "the politics of a politics", triggered by the political power against the citizens.

What Tubilewicz reconstructs about the emerging relationships in the 1990s between Taiwan and Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland fall in this type of de-politicizing strategy. He highlights the repeated efforts of the leadership of the People's Republic of China to press the leadership in Budapest, Prague and Warsaw to maintain a non-political character of their relationships with Taiwan (Tubilewicz, 2012, pp. 44, 52, 57). China had sent similar messages to the USSR to its opening relationships with Taiwan, already in the 1980s (Tubilewicz, 2012, pp. 35, 38). This Chinese pressure was by and large respected by the addressed leaderships and led to a slowing down of their building relationships with Taiwan. We can also learn from his work that although Budapest was the earliest partner of Taiwan, still in the late 1980s (Tubilewicz, 2012, pp. 28-30), only the president of Czechoslovakia, the veteran dissident Vaclav Havel had dared to disregard the Chinese ban on any public reception of the Taiwanese leadership (Tubilewicz, 2012, p. 63). It can be stated that the political relationship between Taiwan and Hungary (respectively, Czechoslovakia and Poland) had started under the pressure of denied political character of the relationships.

The self-restriction of various states to establish diplomatic relationships with Taiwan on the highest level has remained a major challenge ever since the late eighties and has resulted that Taiwan has a lot more informal than formal support by governments from all over the world. Therefore, China's firm intention to keep Taiwan's international relations as de-politicized as possible has been to, a large extent respected by the international community,

---

4 Slavoj Žižek applies a similar classification (Žižek, 2005, p. 12).

both for self-interest and for the interest of Taiwan. The outcome is a certain de-politicization of Taiwan's international relations. However, PRC can only achieve the de-politicizing of the official "establishment"-type of relationships, it cannot be equally efficient to undermine the informally maintained forms of political solidarity and cooperation with Taiwan.

### **Hungary and Taiwan – Similarities and Differences**

At first sight it is hard to find two more remote countries in cultural, social, geo-political and political sense than Hungary and the Republic of China. But as mentioned before, it is precisely the uneven trajectory of mapping a problem of social and political science, that might highlight special domestic traits of both sides. Whereas Hungary is usually subject to comparisons between the countries of the Central and Eastern European region, the Balkan and the European Union, Hungary and Taiwan is much rare as a topic of comparison. Similarly, Taiwan is routinely compared with the People's Republic of China, Japan, South Korea and occasionally with the Eastern Pacific region, but rarely with Central and Eastern European countries. A Hungary – Taiwan comparison is not obvious. However, there are similarities which deserve attention.

Firstly, both nations have a sense of being on island in some particular context. This is obvious in case of Taiwan, and not only because of its actually being an island in the south Chinese sea. But also, because although, it intersects with the Chinese nation, it has a different identity; it has emerged from a past that differs from the past of mainland China. Moreover, the threat of a hectic, even unfriendly relationship with the People's Republic of China sharpens Taiwan's insular consciousness (Ying-hsiung, 2004, pp. 254-255).<sup>5</sup> For Hungarians the sense of being an island is caused by multiple motifs in historiography and in collective imagination. Firstly, the Nordic and Central-Asian roots of the Hungarian language, separates it from the neighboring nations, of which languages are partly of Slavic, partly of Latin origin. Secondly, after the closing treaties of the First World war in 1919 and 1920, from the nations of the dissolving Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Hungary has lost the most from its earlier territories which forced millions of native Hungarian speakers into ethnic communities of the neighboring countries to date.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, the effects and the memory of a foreign domination, both suppressing and civilizing the country, in both cases lasting a half century. This is the case of the Austrian-Hungarian domination between 1867 and 1919, and the case of the Japanese domination in Taiwan between 1896 and 1946. Beyond the differences of the two geopolitical constructions

---

5 Ying-hsiung Chou beautifully describes the painful interplay between being an insider and an outsider in the meantime as a Taiwanese resettler from China in Taipei: „Stranger in One's Own City: The Other Way of Writing Contemporary Taiwan.”

6 The Treaty of Trianon from 1920 which concluded the consequences of the end of the Austrian-Hungarian empire and of the world war for Hungary, is infamous among Hungarians, strongly fuels nationalism and supplies motifs of political imagination in Hungary to date.

(Hungary was not colonized by Austria, but it was embraced into an uneven hierarchy of shared ruling), there is also a stunning analogy.

The Kuomintang domination in Taiwan and the communist rule in Hungary have shared the character of a one-party dictatorship (in case of Taiwan together with martial law) and again, the same length of time, almost exactly forty years (in Taiwan between 1947 and 1987, in Hungary from 1948 until 1989). Beyond the obvious differences between the anti-communist and nationalist military dictatorship of Kuomintang on the one hand and the Soviet-type of communist dictatorship in the Central European Hungary on the other hand, the anti-pluralist nature of the one-party ruling, with all its similar consequences in the spying, arrest and execution of citizens, also establish an analogy in the political memory of the two countries (Pan, 2023, p. 31).

Fifth, the 1990s and 2000s have been very similar in terms liberal democratic reform conceptions like free market, political pluralism, freedom of expression, religion and free press. For both regions this was the time of “transit to democracy” as labelled in the scholarship on the post-state-socialist Europe. Taiwan and Hungary had shared fundamental elements of the late twentieth century agenda of national liberations from various dictatorial regimes. In 1989, when Hungary had experienced such a moment of liberation, a similar attempt was crashed in the People’s Republic of China.

Sixth, the similar post-second world war history of the two nations has implied a further shared problem: collective memory. The consequences of the political repression and crimes that followed February 28, 1947, the instauration of the Chinese nationalist government of Kuomintang and the martial law as its weapon, are similar to the mental struggles of post-state-socialist Central- and Eastern Europe. The earlier building and the later removal of controversial memorials and statues of the glories and heroes of a fallen regime are the material symptoms of a split in the collective memory. Similarly, the unsettled controversies of justice to the victims are also a strong parallel.

The succinct overview from above of similar historical elements shared by the two nations sufficiently illustrates that a comparative analysis of certain aspects of their reality can be meaningfully anchored in space and time. The insular consciousness, the effects of a suppressing, but civilizing and more developed foreign neighbor, the quest for freedom from dictatorship, the experience of one-party rule, the opening toward liberal democracy and finally the split of collective memory are all aspects, which build bridges between the two nations.

## **Hungary**

Between the late 1980s and early 2000s, Hungary had been at the forefront of emerging democracies among the post-state socialist dictatorships. The most successful laboratory of pluralism, freedom of expression, and civil society is nowadays the most successful regime in turning its earlier achievements into the opposite.<sup>7</sup> Although Hungary is not alone in this

---

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the special difficulties of the formation civil societies in the post-state-socialist Central-Europe, see: Ter-hsing Cheng, Chia-ming Chang: "Development and Difficulty of Civil Society in the Central and Eastern

process of illiberal backsliding, scholarship shows the highly contextual character of how this takes place in the different countries of the post-state-socialist region (Bochsler, Joun, 2020, p. 181; Cianetti, Dawson, Hanley, 2018, pp. 244, 248; Surowiec and Stetka, 2020, pp. 1-3). Whereas Hungary was contributing to the ending of communist dictatorships, in the present it both imports autocratic panels, ideas, and policies, as well as exports political and ideological content together with rhetorical instruments of spreading them (Bozóki – Fleck, 2024, p. 181).<sup>8</sup>

The actual content supply of Hungary's political paradigm change is mainly reduced to an explicit national-conservative value agenda, even supportive of domestic and global far-right elements of white supremacy, homophobia and illiberalism.<sup>9</sup>

To grasp, first of all the stakes of this kind of seemingly politically neutral framing of political communication activity, one should not underestimate the indirect political gathering potential of fundamentally non-political social activities (Couldry, 2015, p. 38), especially in environments of widespread apolitical attitudes (Reckwitz, 2019, pp. 106, 128, 275; Tamás, 2014, p. 24; Tamás, 2015, pp. 28-42; Laruelle, 2022, p. 308).<sup>10</sup> Findings indicate that frequent news consumption which co-exists with a non-partisan, open-minded political attitude tends to display a relatively low degree of radicalization and mobilization. Contrary to this in the case of the joint presence of low interest in news and partisan attitude, the tendency for radicalization and mobilization is relatively high (Westerwick, Johnson, Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017, pp. 343-364). It can be assumed that in strongly apolitical environments in-direct political communication can bring political agendas closer to people, because it may be based on seemingly politically neutral issues of public preference. This fact may justify the importance of researching alternative and in-direct means of political communication, because in an apolitical environment such means may be more significant than in environments of higher level of political awareness and civic activity. The stories from below are meant to illustrate the role of implicit government communication especially targeted to abroad, in case of Hungary.

Before turning to the stories as examples of the above government politic and its communication methods, it needs to be emphasized, that what makes the Hungarian

---

Europe: Cases of Czech Olomouc and Slovak Presov”.

8 By the voting of the application of Article 7. of the European Fundamental Contract against Hungary in September 2022, the large majority of the European Parliament had approved the statement, that due to the conscious and systematic violation of the common European values in Hungary didn't count any longer a full democratic state. (europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy)

9 Hungarian prime-minister Viktor yorbán emphasizes the migrant threat, anti-LGBTQ propaganda, blames liberal values and talks of "foreign mercenaries". See Keno Verseck: "Viktor Orban's campaign against George Soros 'mercenaries'," (Deutsche Welle: <https://www.dw.com/en/viktor-orbans-campaign-against-george-soros-mercenaries/a-44954661>)

10 Kauth and King's interpretation commented by Laruelle, distinguishes "ideological illiberalism" from "disruptive illiberalism" and highlights, that the latter denotes practices. Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King. 2020. "Illiberalism." *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 61 (3): pp. 365–405. Mentioned by Marlene Laruelle.



government special is its tendency to reduce the description of what counts as the authentically Hungarian cultural and political stance, to the national-conservative illiberal agenda, even leaning toward white supremacist and homophobic tones. The related contents are presented in this strategy of policy and communication as genuinely Hungarian and exclusively authentic elements of the national spirit, and as, a consequence everything abating from this spirit is portrayed as non-Hungarian or nationally impure. The following cases are meant to illustrate this politics and its communication.

- I. While constraining the Central European University founded by George Soros to leave the country in 2018, the government founded in the 2010s its own higher education institution, Mathias Corvinus Collegium from over 1.5 billion euros. This amount exceeded the budget of the entire Hungarian higher education system. MCC has recently opened a campus in Brussels and Cluj, one of the major cities of the former Hungarian-dominated region Transylvania, Romanian territory since 1945,<sup>i</sup> as well as in Vienna (Szentés, 2024, p. 230-231).
- II. In the office of the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán the map of Greater Hungary is on the wall. Displaying the largest territory, the former Hungarian Kingdom had once embraced until its disintegration upon the concluding treaties of the first World War in 1920, the map has been known ever since in the neighboring countries as the symbolic questioning of the post-first-World-War status quo of Hungary. It appears on the wall of most of the offices of the state leadership.

Transylvania, the former Hungarian Kingdom's largest territory, has been part of Romania since 1920 (its northern half re-annexed to Hungary between 1940-1944). The leading governing party Fidesz had founded a free university summer camp to be held every July since 1990 at Tuşnad, in the Hungarian-speaking Secler area of Eastern Transylvania, 90% inhabited by ethnic Hungarian natives. The camp has served ever since as the largest social event to meet politicians, celebrities, artists, and scholars from both countries, engaging with many students, journalists, and others in free discussions in Hungarian language. The most popular program of the seven days of the camp used to be Viktor Orbán's speech, as an occasion to address topics of Hungarian and international interest and to share his most recent political theses and agenda. This was the fore where he proclaimed the U-turn in Hungarian politics toward the creation of an "illiberal state of the working people" in 2014.<sup>ii</sup> And this was the fore, where he spoke out in 2022, against the mixing between European and Asian races, which he described as a path never followed by Hungary in the past, and as not to be followed in the future.<sup>iii</sup> (Later correcting himself as referring to cultural mixing.)

It is hard to overestimate the symbolic power of announcing such ideological stances and policies in an area, densely inhabited by the ethnic Hungarian minority on Romanian territory. It reifies Viktor Orbán's intention to invoke Greater Hungary as a rhetorically existing political power center, in exchange for its inexistence as a geo-political reality. The current political regime in Hungary is far more pragmatic than invoking the

nostalgia for the lost Greater Hungary in real terms, it tends however to use this memory extensively as a tool of phantasy in political communication.<sup>iv</sup>

- III. The Financial Times presented the story of the substantial financial support the French far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen had obtained from the Hungarian bank MKB, of close ties to the government and with high political approval.<sup>v</sup>

By making not just its political voice heard abroad, but also its methodology of disseminating it, the government can gain a special kind of power position on a regional or even global scale. This special power position tends to emerge from its strategy of political communication export. (For instance, on May 2022, Hungary was the first European organizer of CPAC – Conservative Political Action Conference, the largest conservative political forum in the world. (cpachungary.com))

The Orbán-regime has managed to retain the old-fashioned nationalist narrative, traditionally unfriendly toward the neighboring nations on the one hand but adjusting it to the new wave of the refusal of multiculturalism and the human-rights-based Euro-Atlantic stance on the other hand. It forms in this way new anti-Western alliances with neighboring powers (Enyedi, 2020, pp. 367-369). In the turmoil of its permanent conflicts with the European Union, the government needs international self-branding. It also needs foreign partners for its special European agenda, as well as for marching against Euro-conform and North American social liberalism and multi-culturalism on the international stage (Mos, 2020, p. 280). This regime has proved to function (especially since 2016) as a successful model in authoritarian backsliding for several countries of the Central- and Eastern European region and even beyond (Bochsler, Joun, 2020, p. 183; Enyedi, 2023), including more remote powers like Turkey and the People's Republic of China. This new front even cuts across party identities and party union borders (the Check Babis is liberal, the Slovakian Fico is socialist, the Serbian Vučić is affiliated with the EPP, the Romanian Dragnea is Social-Democrat, etc.) (Enyedi, 2020, p. 368), including even the Islamist Erdogan and the communist Xi. This success indicates the inclusive potential of the illiberal agendas from various countries and political formations.

## Taiwan

The grass-root-type of social self-formation runs counter to the Confucian tradition of politics as described by scholarship on East Asia. It is often claimed that authoritarian politics can be well founded on Confucian values like family and hard work. Accordingly, top-down market formations against the Tocquevillian-type (rather Anglo-Saxon in application) of genuine market formations which are also consistent with grass-root civic formations can all be deduced from the political implementation of Confucianism (Palmer, David A. and Alexander, C. Jeffrey, Sunwoong, Park and Agnes Shuk-mei Ku, 2018, pp. 5, 6). They also mention Kuomintang as relying upon this tradition in its efforts to de-politicize society's own political self-formation (Palmer, David A. and Alexander, C. Jeffrey, Sunwoong, Park and Agnes Shuk-Mei Ku, 2018, p. 9). This is what by 1987 seems to be reversed and replaced ever since by a grass-root-type of social self-formation.

Angle C. Stephen describes the theoretical and practical implementations of certain elements of the Confucian legacy as soft authoritarianism. He identifies the sense for one-party

organization, traditional family, hard work, ethics of self-restriction and ritualism as politically meaningful forms of normative reasoning and justification of collective bonds. (Angle, 2012, pp. 12-13, p. 136).

As the political culture opposite to the above interpretation of the Confucian legacy, Ryan Dunch elaborates the way in which Taiwan's transition period took place from Kuomintang rule to democracy. One of his major findings is that the practice of democratization gave birth to the reification of the growing of the people into a nation (Dunch, 2020, p. 3-20). (By his vocabulary he clearly refers to the formation of a political nation.) Rwei Ren-Wu also underscores the grass-root character of the Taiwanese transition. Talking about voters rather than nation and people, the author observes the diminishing interest of the Taiwanese in political parties in contrast to the increasing dynamism of local and issue-based self-organization (Rwei, 2020, pp. 12-13). In later developments the stabilization of the civic political character of the society has resulted a generally active electorate, also interested in elections on nation level. Taiwan is an exception in the trend of declining interest toward politics among the developed nations (Esarey, 2020, p. 38).

Rwei also elaborates how the institutionalization of the nation state has contributed to democratization (Rwei, 2020, pp. 48-51). From a global perspective, this evolution is not obvious at all. The nation state, especially its founding ideology, nationalism, has often developed against democratization, and in the post-second world war Western Europe, in the era of globalization, has gradually become the opposite of the nation-state. Not so much in Taiwan, where the formation of the nation state has been parallel with the emerging civic consciousness and sense of self-determination. In his understanding the Japanese colonial occupation has contributed significantly to the creation of resistance, demos, and collective self-identification in general. In the meantime, whereas the Japanese administrative reforms have taught the Taiwanese a lot about institutionalization, as a colonial power, it has also left behind the memory of suppression against any local agenda and collective pride. The next chapter in Taiwan's history, the Kuomintang with its forty-year-long martial law regime was not a fertile ground for elucidating the internal tensions of the past.

As Pan Tsung-Yi puts it, on the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, The Great Hall of People together with the Chinese Natural History Museum and the Revolutionary Museum are meant to unite the past, the present and the future of the Chinese people understood in the context of "one China". However, this unification is, shadowed by the crashed revolt on the same square in 1989 (Pan, 2023, p. 41). This brings us to the problem of collective memory.

Scholarship records collective memory as one of the fields of political mentality in Taiwan. Huang Han-yu highlights on the one hand the difference between the personal and the "exteriorised" memory, the singularity of the personal testimony (Huang, 2023, pp. 178-179). He raises the question on the and, of whether the personal injury, which is unescapably individual can be represented in, the form of public memory at all: experience is personal, representation is public. He states on the other hand that there is no politically neutral memory. In other words, personal memory itself is "constructed" in non-personal, public terms, it relates to the others, hence its political character (Huang, 2023, p. 174). Huang mentions shame as the link between personal experience and person's relatedness to the public (Huang, 2023, p. 183). He highlights that "The Compensation Act for Wrongful Trials on Charges on Sedition and Espionage during the Martial Law Period" revisited in 1998 and the still ongoing process of

reducing transitional justice to ordinary judicial counting illustrates the national struggle with collective memory and its ethical and legal implications (Huang, 2023, p. 194). In 2024, seventy-seven years after the instauration of martial law in Taiwan and thirty-seven years after its ending, factual and normative clarity of the deeds committed and suffered is still an everyday challenge.

In Rwei's reconstruction the end result of the Japanese era was that it fueled the formation of the regional as well as national consciousness, and the understanding of the legitimacy of self-rule. This knowledge was based on the experience Taiwan had obtained from the highly developed, rational Japanese institutionalism. Ironically, this legacy was mobilized precisely against the Japanese rule. (Rwei, 2020, pp. 55, 56, 57, 58). It was in this context – so Rwei's argument goes – in which the civic – people – nation has become the over-arching scheme (Rwei, 2020, p. 73). Ketty W. Chen argues in a similar fashion by highlighting in her essay, "Island Sunrise", that the movement has united the Liberal-Democrats with the Taiwanese national identity, turning it into an all-inclusive identity. It became clear that there was a line of non-interference that the society didn't allow to the power to cross (Chen, 2020, pp. 132-133).

If the possibility of the unification of the People's Republic of China with the Republic of China is a highly controversial political and security issue, the overlaps of the media markets is a living reality. According to Jaw-Nian Huang, the economic influence of China in the Taiwanese media becomes palpable after 2008 (Jaw-Nian, 2020, pp. 87-88). The context of this influence is a paradox: Taiwan's liberal economic policy cannot avoid the self-adjustment of the Taiwanese media owners to the Chinese demands to the media market. However, this fact has far-reaching political implications in terms of market influence and self-censorship of Taiwanese media professionals who want to sell their outlets in the largest market of the world, which is the People's Republic of China. Moreover, the East-Asian hegemony of the mandarin language doesn't stop at the border of any country, especially in the age of the internet.

We learn from the author, how the Chinese offers to advertise, sell and manage journalism produced in Taiwan becomes "domesticated" by formal and informal requests which all follow the central political line of PRC. For instance, he mentions the Tiananmen revolt in 1989 and the Falun Gong religious movement as banned topics for those who want to sell their stories on PRC platforms. These and other restrictive majors have the character of requested censorship, self-censorship, politically conditioned licensing and distribution permission as well as embedded advertising and news bias (Jaw-Nian, 2020, pp. 90-92).

Paradoxically, by its interference in the Taiwanese media the government of the People's Republic of China obtains more influence on the Taiwanese media system than the Taiwanese government itself. Especially, because whereas Taiwan's government applies a classical market liberalism of non-interference, PRC is a highly centralized regime where the embracing of the media into the communication policy of the government, is considered a natural process. This framework of interference unescapably brings about the norm diffusion of PRC to the Taiwanese media production (Jaw-Nian, 2020, p. 108), often unnoticed.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>Kvok Levon highlights how the Taiwanese platforms of independent journalism, InMediahk and Coolloud are resisting to any financial support from established institutions (Kvok, 2023, p. 65).

The Anti-Media Monopoly Movement forged by DPP was an attempt to offer a state level responses to the Chinese media interference. Although this attempt was, undermined by KMT, in 1998 the Budget Act was conceived to diminish media monopolies and excluded government embedded market creation. However, the fundamental problem of the attempts of the People's Republic of China to influence the entire Taiwanese media production system could not be, eliminated. Another area of general information interference of the PRC is disinformation in social media.

As mentioned above the lingua franca character of the Chinese language can easily be applied to reach out potentially every Chinese speaking community (and individual) world-wide, especially in case of the largest Chinese language platform, WeChat (Harold, Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Hornung, 2021, p. 120). Although military experts concluded in 2021 that no disinformation cyber interference had targeted the United States yet, it seemed clear, that interferences that targeted Taiwan also served as “trainings” for their possible extensions to other countries (Harold, Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Hornung, 2021, pp. 119, 127). While Taiwanese disinformation combating platforms like CoFacts and Taiwan Fact Check Center are very efficient, it has been also observed that the disinformation efforts launched by PRC are becoming even more sophisticated. For instance they are applying smart methods of camouflage by using typically Taiwanese features of communication for not being recognized as PRC contents (Harold, Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Hornung, 2021, p. 132).

Finally, it worth remarking that the sunflower movement was opposing a planned economic treaty between the People's Republic of China and a democratically elected Taiwanese government: the democratic resistance was targeting its own government because of a particular policy. It seems that the Taiwan Strait doesn't only separate the mainland China from the Republic of China, but it also separates democracy from non-democracy.

### **Conclusion**

Whereas the development of democracy in Taiwan since the late 1980s onwards exemplifies a joint evolution of political nation-building and civic consciousness, roughly the same period in Hungary is an instance for both the construction and the de-construction of a liberal democracy. In the first case the democratic development emerged from the outdated one-party military rule of the nationalist Kuomintang. In the second case we are dealing with the raise of illiberal political forces in the midst of growing social tensions which have gradually undermined the continuation of a still fragile liberal democracy. Whereas Taiwan exemplifies a grass-root evolution of emerging civic democracy, the short-lived Hungarian liberal democracy had been created by the “elites” of the post-state-socialist early 1990s and imposed by the alliance between the post-state-socialist reformists, and the emerging liberal and conservative elites. In this environment the grass-root element after 1990 ended up weak, and the democratization process has turned into an illiberal regime, explicitly proclaimed and carried out by the government that rules since 2010.

The present paper is an attempt to compare the development of apolitical and politically activist attitudes and phenomena since the late 1980s in Hungary and Taiwan. The role of the dichotomy between politics and apolitics in the understanding of these parallel processes

consists in the various patterns of participation and escape in attitudes toward politics. The comparison consists of the mapping of concepts and phenomena related to the relationship between politicization, de-politicization and re-politicization in the process of democratization. We can also observe that the interplay of politics and apolitics is a dynamic one in so far as institutional politics may be interested to “colonize” civil politics, de-politicizing and re-politicizing it, and de-politicization also occurs on the international scale.

The analysis embraces topics like collective memory, freedom of information as well political history and cultural legacy, all as relevant stocks of examples of participation and escape.



## Academic Sources

Angle, C. Stephen: *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy – Toward Progressive Confucianism*. Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2012

Bochsler, Daniel and Juon, Andreas: Authoritarian footprints in Central and Eastern Europe. *East-European Politics*, 2020, vol. 36 no. 2. pp. 167-187

Bozóki, András – Fleck, Zoltán: “Éltanulóból pária: Az Európai Unió és az Orbán-rezsim” in: Ágh, Attila (ed.): *Magyar zsákutca az Európai Unióban*. Budapest: Gondolat, 2024. pp. 141-189

Chen, Ketty W.: “Island Sunrise: The Sunflower Movement and Taiwan’s Democracy in Transition” in Dunch, Ryan and Esarey, Ashley (eds.): in *Taiwan in dynamic transition: nation-building and democratization*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. pp. 121-139

Cianetti, Licia; Dawson, James; Hanley, Seán: Rethinking “democratic backsliding” in Central and Eastern Europe – looking Beyond Hungary and Poland. *East European Politics*, 2018, vol. 34, no. 3. pp. 243–256

Couldry, Nick: “The social foundations of future digital politics” in: Stephen Coleman and Deen Freelon (eds.): *Handbook of Digital Politics*. Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing., 2015. pp. 35-50

Dunch, Ryan: “Introduction” in Dunch, Ryan and Esarey, Ashley (eds.): in *Taiwan in dynamic transition: nation-building and democratization*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. pp. 3-20

Enyedi, Zsolt: *Illiberal Conservatism, Civilizationalist Ethnocentrism, and Paternalist Populism in Orbán’s Hungary*. Central European University: Democracy Institute Working Papers, 2023

Enyedi, Zsolt: Right-wing authoritarian innovations in Central and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics*, 2020, vol. 36, issue no. 3. pp. 363-377

Esarey, Ashley: “Overview: Democratization and Nation Building in Taiwan” in Dunch, Ryan and Esarey, Ashley (eds.): in *Taiwan in dynamic transition: nation-building and democratization*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. pp. 21-46

Fairbanks, Charles H., Jr. In Andreas Schedler (eds.) *The end of politics?: explorations into modern antipolitics*. Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1996

Gilley, Bruce: “Taiwan’s Democratic Transition: A Model for China?” in: (ed. by Bruce Gilley and Larry Diamond): *Political Change with China. Comparisons with Taiwan*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2008. pp. 1-23

- Harold, Scott W.; Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Nathan; Hornung, Jeffrey W.: Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media. Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 2021
- Hindess, Barry: “Antipolitical Motifs in Western Political Discourse” in: (ed. by Andreas Schedler): *The end of politics?: explorations into modern antipolitics*. Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1996. pp. 21-39
- Huang, Han-yu: “The Politics and Promise of Memory. The White terror in Taiwan as Example” in Chieh-Hsiang, Wu (ed.): *Cultures of Memory in Asia. Dynamics and Forms of Memorialization*. Routledge, 2023
- Jasper, James M. *The art of moral protest: culture, biography and creativity in social movements*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997
- Jaw-Nian, Huang: *The political economy of press freedom: the paradox of Taiwan versus China*. Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2020
- Kivisto, Peter and Scortino, Giuseppe: “Conclusion – Theoretical Issues, Contemporary Perspective” in Palmer, David A. and Alexander, C. Jeffrey, Sunwoong, Park and Agnes Shuk-mei Ku (eds.): *The Civil Sphere in East Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2019
- Konrad, George: *Antipolitics: an essay*. London, Melbourne, New York: Quartet Books, 1984
- Kvok, Levon: *The Independent Media Movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Dissenting Voices*. Routledge, 2023
- Laruelle, Marlene: Illiberalism: a conceptual introduction. *East-European Politics*. 2022, Vol. 38, no. 2. pp. 5-303-327
- Mos, Martijn: Ambiguity and interpretive politics in the crisis of European values: evidence from Hungary. *East-European. East European Politics*, 2020, vol. 36, no. 2. pp. 267–287
- Palmer, David A. and Alexander, C. Jeffrey, Sunwoong, Park and Agnes Shuk-mei Ku: “Introduction. The Civil Spheres in the Cultural and Political Transformations of Modern East Asia” in Palmer, David A. and Alexander, C. Jeffrey, Sunwoong, Park and Agnes Shuk-mei Ku (eds.): *The Civil Sphere in East Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2019. pp. 1-18
- Pan, Tsung-Yi: „The Making of Tienanmen Square as a Realm of Contested Memories“ in Chieh-Hsiang, Wu (eds.): *Cultures of Memory in Asia. Dynamics and Forms of Memorialization*. Routledge, 2023
- Reckwitz, Andreas: *Das Ende der Illusionen. Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019
- Rwei, Ren-Wu: „Nation-State Formation at the Interface: The Case of Taiwan” in *Taiwan in dynamic transition: nation-building and democratization*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. pp. 47-79
- Schedler, Andreas: “Introduction” in: *The end of politics?: explorations into modern antipolitics*. Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1996. pp. 1-20



Szentes, Ágota: “A jogállamot leépítő jog” in Ágh, Attila (ed.): Magyar zsákutca az Európai Unióban. Budapest: Gondolat, 2024. pp. 230-231

Schmitt, Carl: The concept of politics. Chicago: Chicago University Press, (1932) 1996

Schwab, Georg: „Introduction” in: Carl Schmitt: The concept of politics. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996. pp. 3-17

Surowiec, Pawel and Štětka, Václav: Introduction: media and illiberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics*. 2020, vol. 36, no. 1. 1-8

Tamás, Gáspár Miklós: Postfascism și anticomunism. Intervenții filosofico-politice. Trans. Teodora Dumitru, Attila Szigeti. Cluj Napoca: Editura Tact., 2014

Tamás, Gáspár Miklós: Kommunismus nach 1989. Beiträge zu Klassentheorie, Realsozialismus, Osteuropa. Gerold Wallner (Hrsgb., Trans.): Mandelbaum Verlag., 2015

Tubilewicz, Czeslaw: Taiwan and Post-Communist Europe. Routledge, 2012

Zizek, Slavoj: Die politische Suspension des Ethischen. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005

Weller, Robert P.: “Responsive Authoritarianism” in: (ed. by Bruce Gilley and Larry Diamond): Political Change with China. Comparisons with Taiwan. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2008. pp. 117-133

Westerwick, Axel, Johnson, Benjamin K. & Knobloch-Westerwick, Silvia: Confirmation biases in selective exposure to political online information: Source bias vs. content bias. *Communication Monographs*, 2017, vol. 84, no. 3. pp. 343–364

Ying-hsiung, Chou: „Stranger in One’s Own City: The Other Way of Writing Contemporary Taiwan” in Ying-hsiung, Chou and others (ed.): Cultural dilemmas during transitions: East Central Europe versus Taiwan. Munster Lit., 2004. pp. 242-265

Yun, han Chu: “The Evolution of Political Values” in: (ed. by Bruce Gilley and Larry Diamond): Political Change with China. Comparisons with Taiwan. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2008. pp. 27-48

---

<sup>i</sup> With its practice of establishing a quasi-educational institution meant to disseminate militant intellectual content in support of the illiberal regime, Fidesz is not alone: the Intermarium Collegium appears in Laruelle’s paper as a case of similar fashion. (Laruelle, 2022, 317); [Campus in Hungary is Flagship of Orbán’s Bid to Create a Conservative Elite - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [Full text of Viktor Orbán's speech at Băile Tușnad \(Tusnádfürdő\) of 26 July 2014 - The Budapest Beacon](#)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/24/viktor-orban-against-race-mixing-europe-hungary>

<sup>iv</sup> In November 2022 prime minister Viktor Orbán wore a scarf at a football match in Croatia, with a picture of the map of Greater Hungary, displaying the former territories now belonging to Croatia, Serbia, Austria, Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine. The event mentioned by several news agencies and causing outrage among the leaders of all these countries was just one of the instances in Hungary of making a hint at the lost kingdom. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/orbans-greater-hungary-scarf-likely-agenda-central-europe-summit-2022-11-23/>; [Croatia Condemns Viktor Orban for ‘Territorial Aspirations’ - Bloomberg Jazmina Kuzvanovic](#), 05. 10. 2022

<sup>v</sup> [Financial Times: Le Pen Orbán közvetlen utasítására jutott MKB-hitelhez |](#)

[Euronews https://hu.euronews.com/2022/05/30/financial-times-le-pen-orban-kozvetlen-utasitasara-jutott-mkb-hitelhez](https://hu.euronews.com/2022/05/30/financial-times-le-pen-orban-kozvetlen-utasitasara-jutott-mkb-hitelhez)