

**Pázmány Péter Catholic University – Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
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**DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION  
THESIS BOOKLET**

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**INTERNATIONAL IDEOLOGIES, NATIONAL FREEDOM:  
HUNGARY IN THE GRIP OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION ATTEMPTS**

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## **Research Background and Problem Statement**

Since the time of the conquest, we Hungarians have faced numerous wars, yet we have endured – proof that alongside our defeats, we have many victorious battles behind us. Hungary's more than thousand-year-old statehood and national freedom have been repeatedly challenged throughout history. The Turkish subjugation, the Habsburg rule, the German and the Soviet occupation left deep, indelible marks on our national memory, creating seemingly insurmountable historical patterns. The question therefore arises as to what Hungarian freedom means today.

Hungary is approaching the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its modern civil system, which was established through a program of self-governance that laid the foundation for the reform era. The constitutional aspirations that spurred the revolution and struggle for freedom in 1848–1849 were born out of this brief, yet transformative, twenty-year-long period. The courage and patriotism of the youth of March at that time have been continuing to inspire Hungarians. The achievements were initiated with the Compromise of 1867, which maintained Hungary's autonomy for nearly a century, lasting until 1944, with the exceptions of the disruptions caused by the Aster and Bolshevik coups. For centuries, Hungarians fought for collective freedom, essentially the idea of national sovereignty, until it was lost on March 19, 1944. This dissertation begins on that day, as without freedom, national sovereignty cannot exist, nor the other way around.

Following the German occupation on March 19, 1944, Hungary lost its national sovereignty. Between 1945 and 1989, the Soviet occupation inflicted immeasurable damages and deep structural wounds on the Hungarian nation in terms of human life, material wealth, and moral values. Communism claimed 100 million lives worldwide. In Hungary, 700,000 people were deported to forced labor camps, 700 of our compatriots were executed, and 70,000 were imprisoned for political reasons. After the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, 200,000 people were forced to leave the country. Economically, Hungary lagged behind modern market economies due to the wasteful and technologically backward operation of the communist system. Meanwhile, people's basic freedoms and opportunities for action were restricted. As a state within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, Hungary was in a state of lack of freedom for almost half a century.

The 1953 Berlin uprising had even less impact, but the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 significantly weakened the Soviet Union's grip, preceding the invasion of Prague in 1968 and

the introduction of martial law in Poland in 1981. Under Brezhnev's leadership, a sense of overconfident calm prevailed in the Soviet Union, leading to a neglect of the soft political influences infiltrating the Eastern Bloc countries through their own internal reforms. This ideological shift, coupled with simultaneous geopolitical realignments, contributed to the eventual collapse of the rigid power structure and the emergence of what appeared to be Hungarian freedom. The allure of the Western free world, epitomized by the American way of life, grew stronger. What once seemed a distant dream gradually became a part of everyday life by the time of the regime change. Carefully crafted propaganda about the „free world” led many Hungarians in 1989–1990 to embrace capitalism and support Western liberalism.

Although the political transition of 1989–1990 allowed Hungary to return to the century-old development cycle that had been interrupted in 1944, the turbulent period of the following twenty years – as stated in the preamble of Hungary's Fundamental Law – was marked by a lack of a unified, community-based national spirit capable of effectively enforcing the regained freedom. Thus, in 2010, the task was given to restore Hungary's constitutional parliamentary democratic national traditions. However, it soon became apparent that the longed-for free world that the country had joined had, in fact, led to an era of restrictions on freedoms, where indifference, monotony, and hatred reigned; where there is no room for debate; and where the long-standing but now endangered Western traditions of free thought and freedom have been relegated to the background. In this context of international ideologies, Hungarians were compelled to redefine the concept of national freedom.

Was it all an illusion or a deception? The dissertation undertakes to explore this question from a unique perspective: that of posterity, which has the right to demand answers from history.

## **Methodological Framework**

The concept of freedom has always played a central role in the shaping of political history and thinking, which has constantly evolved and been reinterpreted over time, and therefore can be suitable to become the focus of a scientific thesis. The dissertation does not present a predetermined concept of freedom that accompanies a historical description of events but goes beyond the historical analysis and tries to reveal the Hungarian interpretation of freedom and the structures of a national political thought in connection with the events of Hungary's 20<sup>th</sup> century history. So, it combines the analytical methodology of event history and historical philosophy.

The dissertation traces the evolution of Hungarian national freedom, which has been in the crossfire of international ideologies, from 1944 to the present day. In view of the relatively longer period of time examined, the aim of the dissertation is not to analyse the individual political historical phenomena in depth, but rather to outline specific “acupuncture points”, the integration of which into a broader “macro level” might prove to be sufficient to create a framework around the understanding and the assertion of national freedom. By grouping these key moments or themes together, with historical and ideological antecedents at the forefront, the dissertation offers a comprehensive picture of the processes and the underlying mechanisms. Since the writing includes, and even treats the years of the regime change as its axis, a transitological investigation is naturally conducted, allowing for the study of the transition between political systems and its various contexts. In addition, the author employs a “genetic” analysis, investigating three defining phenomena and phases of the freedom of Hungarians in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, not as isolated events, but in their development and origin history: the absence of freedom, the illusion of a free world, and the era of freedom restrictions.

The author's motivation to make Hungarian history the subject of her investigation stemmed from her intention to understand this latter period, the era of freedom restrictions and conflicts. Although the dissertation progresses linearly in chronological order, it was actually written looking back from the present. The author saw an opportunity in the fact that, by placing herself in the role of posterity, she could demand explanations, break taboos and shed light on what happened, how and why it happened in the past the way it did. She could gain authority to do all this by the fact that she herself is experiencing the consequences of certain past processes and decisions, which might also strengthen the credibility of her claims.

## Results

The dissertation aims to define a new strategic-investigative framework within Hungarian political history, grounded in the belief that the nation-state is not an obsolete structure but a vital safeguard for survival. It argues that freedom is not secured by international ideologies but by national self-determination. Formerly, other nations have sought to use Hungary as a testing ground for various social experiments, imposing their own interests at the expense of our national sovereignty; while these days, we must defend Hungarian freedom against various transnational actors. These international struggles and quests for freedom are explored through three key stages: the absence of freedom, the illusion of a free world, and the era of freedom restrictions.

During the time spent in the Soviet sphere of interest, the Hungarian nation – like other nations in the Central and Eastern European region – hibernated in a state deprived of freedom. Practically no freedom existed in Hungary during this period, as every measure served the interests and propaganda needs of the communist government, driven by ideological ambitions rooted in Marxist–Leninist doctrines: the goal was to create what they believed to be a perfect, classless, communist society. The practical manifestations of this included the political and institutional restructuring, ostensibly carried out in the name of the people, but in reality, without their genuine participation, under the guise of public administration reform based on so-called “democratic” principles. The metamorphosis of the public administration apparatus led by various police, judicial and administrative tools dramatically changed the country’s governance and the composition of its political and economic elite. Furthermore, the so-called “salami tactic” clearly indicated the regime’s intent: through the systematic elimination of political opposition and the dissolution of civil society for almost half a century, a totalitarian power structure emerged, characterized by party hegemony that disregarded the rule of law, adhering to the principle of one party, one leader, one path, and one goal. The land issue of 1945 was an integral part of economic planning and management, which encompassed the process from land confiscation to collectivization. The socialist reorganization of agriculture, i.e. the nationalization of private ownership of land and the transfer of ownership to the “proletarian state” appeared as one of the most important achievements of the socialist revolution and a key instrument for the state party’s consolidation of power. This so-called development project was cloaked in euphemisms that distorted reality, fabricating the political myth of “democratic land reform” aimed at social equality. However, under the title of “land reform”, they actually carried out a radical state intervention, which took place in a shocking

way, affected large social masses and had a long-term structural effect, all while cultivating its own loyal cadre. The emerging party-state system spared no effort in shaping a Hungarian society and Hungary in accordance with its own ideas through social control and propaganda. To this end, they created a monopoly situation in the field of communication by structurally transforming the operation of the press, i.e. organizational, personnel and intellectual changes, which was accompanied by the “grinding” of journalists and the recruitment of party soldiers, as well as their ideological training and alignment. The Marxist political propaganda machine was responsible for the creation of a new language suitable for framing the regime’s narrative, the dissemination of the “progressive” ideology within the consciousness industry and embedding it in social practice. In the end, with the methods of intimidation and strong censorship, a forced “compromise” between society and power was imposed for the sake of the system’s existence, resulting in the cultivation of a culture of silence.

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 marked a turning point as the most significant anti-Soviet movement. As Soviet influence waned, Western values and political models increasingly permeated Hungarian society, utilizing soft power mechanisms to promote the concept of a classless, open society. This infiltration occurred through intellectuals, NGOs, the media, corporations, and pop culture, gradually driving political, economic, and social transformations. These changes validated Western liberal ideologies and interests while simultaneously creating the illusion of a free world. From the 1980s onward, civil society played an increasingly prominent role in advocating for an open society and facilitating regime change. During this period, many intellectuals with extensive Western connections—and, more importantly, ideological commitments—became politically active, embedding themselves within the power structures. This involvement effectively made them custodians of indirect political power, often acting in ways that did not align with the interests of the Hungarian society. As this process unfolded, the intelligentsia began to evolve into a moralizing elite, representing a new secular voice that supplanted the previously dominant “clergy”. In other words, the intellectual milieu was instrumental in preparing the groundwork for political structural change. By the 1980s, the crisis of the socialist system and subsequent economic reforms led to the onset of economic liberalization in Hungary, which in turn facilitated the rise of consumer culture. The removal of previous restrictions led to a significant increase in the availability of consumer goods, at the same time, the stimulation of consumption took on a central role, while Western consumer values and customs became widespread in Hungary. The behaviour of Hungarian consumers quickly adapted to these new patterns, which had a decisive

appeal and became an important part of the identity. In the meantime, economic restructuring occurred. As consumer culture developed, American brands and lifestyle elements, once merely aspirational, became tangible realities and integrated into everyday life during the transition period. By 1989–1990, many people were captivated by the American spirit and lifestyle. The increasing availability of Western products led to significant cultural shifts in consumption habits. The influx of new consumer goods, fashion, and music revitalized cultural life, altered everyday experiences, and influenced behaviour across various domains, including workplaces, relationships, and even the military. Thus, the true revolution lay in the transformation of behaviours, culture, and values, which had profound implications and initiated significant social structural change. The acceptance and adaptation of Western values and lifestyles reinforced the demand for social transformation. This shift ultimately contributed to the triumph of democracy and the market economy over socialism and the planned economy, setting the stage for and accelerating the regime change that took place in Hungary at the end of the 1980s.

In recent decades, profound trends have emerged in social, political, and economic life, posing serious challenges by amplifying the effects of inevitable demographic shifts, outsourcing political decision-making, and fundamentally altering the existing global economic order. These developments herald the onset of an era characterized by restrictions on freedom. Firstly, our world stands on the brink of a population crisis, driven by the social complexities of multicultural societies, where parallel worlds with distinct religious and cultural compositions foster persistent ethnic tensions, thereby stretching the traditional frameworks of societal organization. In the 21st century, technological corporations, civil organizations, and philanthropists—acting as proponents of "universal values"—have increasingly influenced political processes. Without democratic authorization or oversight, these actors create political crises that challenge the authority of genuine political entities and sovereign nation-states. Concurrently, global economic trends have exacerbated an already volatile, crisis-like environment, underscored the limitations of unchecked globalization and highlighted the necessity of restoring trust in nation-states as viable solutions. While these shifts appear to challenge Fukuyama's concept of liberal democracy as the ultimate endpoint of history, there is growing concern that Western civilization may be producing its own "last man", as described by Fukuyama. The West, in its pursuit of liberation, has effectively created a series of religious substitutes through liberalism, Marxism, and other ideologies, offering a false salvation that encases the idea of progress within an illusory vision of perfection.

However, it has become evident that people cannot fully embrace a worldview in which they themselves are the ultimate moral authority; instead, when confronted with existential emptiness, they are prone to cling to any available belief system. This phenomenon, however, carries the existential risk of Europe's decline. Hungary, in contrast, has charted a distinct path within the broader global context, despite the fact that its post-1989 transition was influenced by the Western narrative of the "end of history". At the time of Hungary's regime change in 1989–90, the ideological divide between East and West was so stark that a strong anti-communist stance was almost inevitably linked to the adoption of Western liberal ideas. This was largely due to Hungary's experience under Soviet occupation, which not only imposed communist rule but also attempted a radical social transformation. This process left deep structural fractures within the Hungarian nation, providing fertile ground for Western liberal ideology to take root. The resulting social order, devoid of an independent political alternative, became a blank canvas for yet another social transformation experiment, one that infiltrated the fragmented fabric of the Hungarian nation. In essence, while Hungarians regained their national freedom 35 years ago, the absence of a unified national identity meant that this freedom lacked a cohesive custodian. The turbulent decades following the regime change culminated in a pivotal moment in 2002, when the prevailing *zeitgeist* of individual freedom was supplanted by a renewed emphasis on community, prioritizing national cohesion over a society of loosely connected individuals. This shift was marked by the emergence of civil circles, the launch of national petitions, and the initiation of a referendum – developments that ultimately culminated in the establishment of the System of National Cooperation in 2010. The System of National Cooperation, as a social contract, influences the structure of society, and can be provocatively interpreted as a form of social transformation. However, unlike international ideologies that seek to reconstruct society by dismantling national identity, the System of National Cooperation aims to build a cohesive nation through social transformation. This system, therefore, not only provides the foundational structure for nation-building in Hungary but also ensures that the resulting social stability asserts its sovereignty within the international arena.

Throughout Hungary's history, the country has frequently served as a testing ground for social transformation initiatives driven by international ideologies, as well as political and financial interests, originating alternately from the East and the West. However, the System of National Cooperation has provided Hungary with the opportunity to genuinely exercise the freedom it regained 35 years ago and has defended over the past three and a half decades. For



this reason, the System of National Cooperation stands as the most significant development in the political, economic, and social trajectory of modern Hungarian history.

## **Publications and Appearances in Connection with the Broader Topic of the Thesis**

### **Studies**

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Halkó Petra – John J. Mearsheimer: *John J. Mearsheimer: A Nagy Téveszme Liberális Álmok és Nemzetközi Realitások című könyvének bemutatója.* Századvég Alapítvány, Budapest, 2022. november 29.

Halkó Petra – Mráz Ágoston – Pócza István: *Választási értékelő – Minek köszönhető az újabb Fidesz-KDNP 2/3?* Fiatalok Batthyány Köre, Budapest, 2022. április 12.

Halkó Petra: *Az Európai Unió eszköztára.* Magyar Népfőiskolai Collegium, Balatonlelle, 2023. június 17.

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Halkó Petra: *Valami vagy bármi: mi következik az utolsó ember után?* KIDA – Károli Interdiszciplináris Akadémia, Budapest, 2024.