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Living in a Parallel Universe: From Brussels to Orbán, and On¹

“This time it’s different,” yet again

The European Union, as a political project epitomising the idea of the end of history, has spent many decades bringing in the new and soon-to-be Member States to join the common end-point of democracy, but has failed to end the end, so to speak, in trying to pass over the problem that every democracy is primarily concerned with. As a supranational political entity, it has thus far failed to find a technical solution that would convincingly link the “by” and “of” the European people. Accordingly, it has become increasingly obvious that merely shifting the attention to the “for the people”, highlighting the many benefits of European integration, will be of no avail.

Therefore, for many members of the Brussels thought collective, well versed in endemic self-indoctrinated optimism, the 2014 European elections were seen as the turning point we have all been waiting for. The reason for enthusiasm lay in the informal and essentially supplementary mechanism that was first proposed in a resolution of the European Parliament in November 2012:

[O]n 22 November 2012 [...] the EP adopted a resolution in which it urged the European political parties to “nominate candidates for the Presidency of the Commission”. Its supporters hoped that the rivalry between lead candidates, and their corresponding sets of political preferences, would mobilize citizens and increase the participation rate in European elections. It was furthermore hoped that this kind of competition would also help giving the elections a

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more pan-European character and would perhaps even assist in creating a real ‘European public space’.²

“This time it’s different”, went the slogan of the campaign that followed in 2014. This time, went the pledge, the elections would set the ground for a more transparent, more inclusive, more integrated, in short, more ‘European’ European Union. However, the experiment – now termed the *Spitzenkandidaten* system – produced an ambiguous result. While it ended up in one of the proposed candidates ultimately being appointed to the position of Commission President, it nevertheless failed to significantly boost the democratic appearance, which it was designed to generate in the first place. However, as the limited success of the innovation was perceived to be a result of contingent circumstances – from the relatively short duration of the campaign to the “sheer novelty of the process”³ – the experiment seemed worthy of a second chance.

The *Spitzenkandidaten* process of 2014 was a political innovation aimed at offering European citizens clarity on the names of contenders for the top executive post in the European Union and their electoral programmes. In this sense, it fulfilled its purpose and led to a stronger and more mature relationship between the institutions. It contributed to making European democracy more complete. However, this remains a work in progress. For 2019 and beyond, more effort is needed to improve the *Spitzenkandidaten* model, by ensuring that campaigns are active and dynamic. This is first and foremost the responsibility of the European political parties, and relies in part on their relationship with national constituents. The objective at the end of the day is for the European elections to be about European issues: about the challenges that Europeans face jointly in the Union. More than sixty years into the project and at a historic time of relaunching the Union in a smaller setting, this is what both the institution and the citizens deserve.⁴

² Hilde Reiding and Fons Meijer, “This time it’s different’ – the European lead candidate procedure of 2014 and its historical background”, *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, 39 (1/2019), p. 76.

³ Laura Tilindyte, “Election of the President of the European Commission. Understanding the Spitzenkandidaten Process”, 2019, p. 6. Available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630264/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)630264_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630264/EPRS_BRI(2018)630264_EN.pdf) (accessed 20 October 2019).

⁴ European Political Strategy Centre, “Building on the Spitzenkandidaten Model Bolstering Europe’s Democratic Dimension”, 2018, p. 10. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/>

Hence, the goal of the 2019 reprise was self-evident. Even though some of the parliamentary groups showed early signs of refusing to play by the same rules (the Greens and the European Left each nominated two and Alde nominated no less than seven ‘lead candidates’), the illusion of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process having a binding nature had to be further amplified. In other words, not only was it necessary to strengthen the link between political groups and their leading personas, but also the connection between the proposed lead candidates, the election results, and the future president of the European Commission had to be promoted as being obligatory: one of the faces that helped European citizens to establish their supranational political identity would ultimately become their (European) leader.

Due to the opaque structure of the European political space, it is almost impossible to identify the agency behind this de-subjectivised, meta-biased propaganda; it is almost impossible to identify the exact protagonists of the injunction not only to cast a vote and hence recognise oneself as a European citizen, but also to demonstrate a strictly ‘European’ motivation for voting. However, the message was clear enough. While the task of the political parties was to nominate their respective *Spitzenkandidaten*, the task of the electorate was to provisionally fall for the illusion, i.e. to act as if – with the idea of lead candidates – Europe had finally found a simple, yet effective, tool that would overcome the internal contradictions of the electoral process.

It should come as no surprise that the majority of citizens still managed to stay immune to the interpellation, and either did not vote at all or kept the focus on their particular national contexts. The better-informed voters, however, especially those who took the team building of the European political spirit seriously, had quite some multitasking to do. Besides keeping in mind both levels at which their electoral decisions would be evaluated, they also carried the burden of actively ignoring the formal vagueness of the procedure, of performing a constructive disavowal of their own better knowledge. As regards the formal rules of the procedure, things were much more obscure.

Once the parliamentary elections have been held, the European party which is able to command a majority governing coalition would likely [sic] see its spitzenkandidat likely [sic] become the Commission President. The European Council proposes a candidate for the Presidency, “taking into account the elections to the European Parliament” and under the expectation that the candidate put forward by the party which wins the most seats will be “first to be considered”. The European Parliament then votes on the candidate, requiring a majority for them to be confirmed as Commission President. If the candidate does not obtain the required majority, the European Council proposes a new candidate within one month, to be elected by the same procedure.⁵

A slip of the pen that – likely – occurred in the first sentence of this summary, published on the *Euronews* website just before the elections took place, is very telling. The ‘likelihood’ of any lead candidate becoming the Commission president was, in fact, highly conditional due to the rather flexible wording of the first part of the Article 17(7) of the Lisbon Treaty:

Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Lisbon Treaty (or, to be more precise, the amendments from 2009) brought forward a significant shift in the inter-institutional relations in favour of the European Parliament, there was still “no automaticity in this process,” as Donald Tusk summarised the discussion on the issue of lead candidates held by the Council in February 2018.⁶ On the one hand,

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⁵ Luke Hurst, “European Elections 2019: What is a spitzenkandidat”. Available at <https://www.euronews.com/2019/04/24/european-elections-2019-what-is-a-spitzenkandidat> (accessed 20 October 2019).

⁶ “Informal meeting of the 27 heads of state or government, 23 February 2018”. Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2018/02/23/> (accessed 20 October 2019).

the European Council is obliged to “take into account” the election results, but on the other, it is formally fully justified in choosing what exactly it is that has to be taken into account.

In retrospect, the 2014 appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker, which at that time appeared to confirm the validity of the experiment, rather turned out to be a contingent exception to the rule. However, since the exception obviously took place before any rule had been established, the European public mistook it for a necessary consequence of the initial decision of the European People’s Party (EPP) being subsequently confirmed at the ballot boxes. There was hardly anybody who genuinely believed that Juncker’s election in any way testified to the political class having conformed to the will of the European people. Still, the sheer appearance of the automaticity of the process offered the minimum material support for its 2019 repetition.

Some government leaders had serious objections against greater EP influence or politicizing the Commission’s presidency, which is why Juncker’s nomination by the European Council was accompanied by a declaration in which the European Council declared that it intended to “consider the process for the appointment of the President of the European Commission for the future, respecting the European treaties.” However, informal institutional changes that have emerged between formal treaty revisions are notoriously difficult to overturn. Several European political parties have already started preparing a procedure to select their lead candidate for the 2019 elections, and among scholars and commentators, it is also generally expected that the precedent set in 2014 is unlikely to be ignored in the next round of European elections and Commission appointments.⁷

Most of the better-informed voters – who, somewhat paradoxically, were the only ones prone to fall for the illusion in the first place – knew well enough that, on paper, there was no guarantee that the process would follow the script promoted by the European ideological apparatuses and confirmed (to say the least) by the “scholars and commentators” some months before the elections. However, in these circumstances, the balance between faith and knowledge – between trust in the authority of the 2014 precedent and the awareness of an ill-defined formal procedure that did not allow for a definitive answer – was

⁷ Reiding and Meijer, “This time it’s different”, p. 78.

difficult to keep. As a consequence, the ones who insisted on rejecting the naïve position predominantly turned cynical – thereby confusing an indefinite outcome for another version of false certainty. In any event, at that point the decision was still abstract – and so was the illusion.

As the campaign advanced, things started to change. Noticing the lack of engagement and enthusiasm of the official EPP candidate Manfred Weber, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the likely winners of the elections had already changed their minds and effectively abandoned the agreed procedure – thereby re-separating the elections from the *Spitzenkandidaten* contest before it even began. However, it was precisely the signs of a detour from what should have been the most probable course of events that – perhaps unexpectedly – galvanised the illusion proper. The very fact that most of the other lead candidates seemed not only more engaged in the campaign, but also far more ‘presidential’ than the candidate who represented the political group we all knew would, in fact, win the elections – this very divergence – created the impression that something real was nonetheless going on. In these brief moments during the televised debates between the candidates, it, indeed, became possible to start visualising the future, in which some of the *Spitzengespenste* on the screen, who had no chances of winning the elections, would somehow play a central part in European politics. And it was at these brief moments precisely – the moments the illusion started producing real effects – that we finally adopted the illusion, which was never our own, and immersed ourselves in the parallel universe of a non-existent political entity.

However, as the European Council, after weeks of negotiations, finally adopted the decision to nominate for the post the German Secretary of Defence Ursula von der Leyen, the effect was hardly one of relief. On the one hand, the intervention of *realpolitik* could be seen as a sobering disenchantment; but on the other, knowing that some of the protagonists of the *realpolitik* were involved in both stages of the process, the end effect was far more dubious. Bringing in the voters to take part in building up the parallel universe, instead of realistically facing the impossibilities and formalising the electoral process beforehand, was bad enough in itself. What was even worse, however, was to abort the particular process without even trying to face the consequences and, for that matter, assume responsibility for the objective deception of the citizens that arose out of the Brussels ideologues’ private *Schwärmerei*.

Incidentally, while most of the European politicians involved were busy making the *Spitzenkandidaten* fiasco unhappen, the most reasonable response came from a perhaps unexpected source – the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

[T]he lead candidate – or *Spitzenkandidat* – system has not gone away, but has simply returned to its proper place. For it's obvious that the strategic-political direction of the European Union is not determined by the Commission, but by the leaders of the Member States' democratically elected governments: heads of state or prime ministers. The Commission does not need to pursue an independent programme because, even after the most recent election, the Council of Ministers again adopted a document setting out the direction for it to follow. In any case, strategic decisions are not to be taken in the Commission but in the Council, on which the elected prime ministers sit. So the point of the *Spitzenkandidat*, of the lead candidate, was never to somehow deprive the Council of the right to appoint the President of the Commission, which it is empowered to do by the Founding Treaty. It was to allow voters the possibility to influence the assignment of an important European position. Therefore the logical approach – and we need to get back to it – is for the European parties to put forward lead candidates, and the candidate of the victorious party to be appointed President of the European Parliament: not of the Commission, but of the European Parliament. And the Commission must remain an organisation subject to the influence of the prime ministers.⁸

Having been one of the protagonists in the controversy that effectively ended the EPP candidate's run for the post⁹, his seemingly neutral assessment that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system “simply returned to its proper place” can hardly be considered as particularly genuine. There were several pragmatic reasons for Orbán to seize the opportunity to help undermine the goal of the predominant current of the EPP. For the outcome of the events was not only a blast to the general federalist tendencies in the EU, but has also weakened the position of the formalised supranational structures in the Parliament in favour of the more informal ideological collectives that are, in principle, still based on the nation-

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⁸ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 30th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp”, June 27 2019. All speeches available at <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches>.

⁹ “EPP divorce looms after Orban rejects Weber as Spitzenkandidat”. Available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/epp-divorce-looms-after-orban-rejects-weber-as-spitzenkandidat/> (accessed 20 October 2019).

al premises, although not necessarily Eurosceptic.¹⁰ Moreover, one could well argue for a completely obverse approach to overcome the deadlock – that is, to introduce new instruments to further strengthen the supranational character of the European institutions, such as transnational lists or direct presidential elections. The latter, at least, would likely resolve all the inconsistencies of the existing procedure – and would, in this respect, easily fit within the category of “logical approaches.”

However, the ingenuity of Orbán’s intervention, the reason why his suggestion leaves opponents with little to say in response, lies in his ability to propose an obviously biased solution that, in addition, goes against all the progress towards a more ‘integrated Europe’ made in the last decade, but which nonetheless gives an impression of remaining within the given framework of searching for common solutions – by effectively not even being a solution proper. Orbán’s strategy has never been openly anti-European, as some superficial critics, who have never read a line of his speeches, would like to see. While the vulgar Eurosceptics’ reaction to the *Spitzenkandidaten* debacle would simply be to exit the nonsense, Orbán’s solution holds to the concept but converts it into its opposite. The concept, originally invented to strengthen the supranational element of the Commission, thus becomes a vehicle of the anti-federalist, inter-national, reverse transformation of the European Union, in which the Commission remains “an organization subject to the influence of prime ministers.”

Returning to common sense

For all that, the crux of Orban’s intervention is not the content of the proposal as such, but the immediate effect it produces – that is, the effect of common sense, the effect of bringing back reason and logic by proposing the simplest

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¹⁰ As things stand in November 2019, Fidesz’s membership in the EPP remains suspended as a result of a (joint) decision made in March of the same year: “[W]e’re keeping our membership suspended. We, as the Hungarian governing party, haven’t yet decided whether or not we’ll continue our shared life with the European People’s Party. We expect the People’s Party to clarify its views and plans, and then we’ll make a decision on this. [...] The question is whether the new president [Donald Tusk] will be able to stop this process [of drifting to the left]. If so, we have a future together. If not, we’ll have to build another political community.” (“Interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme ‘Good Morning Hungary’”, 22 November 2019).

possible solution to the impasse brought about by good intentions having gone bad. Moreover, what makes this intervention even more appealing is the fact that it challenges the initial idea by activating its intrinsic common-sense potential – which is what “we have to get back to.” It was perfectly reasonable, Orbán implies, to introduce a democratic procedure that evokes ‘normal’ national elections and thereby ‘normal’ state formation. However, to preserve the initial common sense inscribed in the innovation, we have to stay real and avoid pushing the situation beyond its limits.

As many have noted, common sense has become one of the central political categories of the late 20th and the 21st centuries, predominantly on the right of the spectrum.

[A]s democracy has turned into the only acceptable global norm, common sense has become more valued than ever, both conceptually and rhetorically, in public life. What is odder still is that, in the West, the appeal to common sense as the foundation for effective political solutions has [...] become increasingly the province of the right, from Jean-Marie Le Pen’s xenophobic celebrations, starting in the 1980s, of the “good sense” of authentic Frenchmen, to Ontario Premier Mike Harris’s so-called Common Sense Revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s against taxes and big government, to the “common sense conservatism” touted circa 2010 by American pundits Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, Glenn Beck, and their Tea Party supporters. In recent years, even the great “American” apostle of common sense, the radical Englishman Tom Paine, has been appropriated as a sage of the right.¹¹

What makes the contemporary return of common sense a genuine political novelty, however, is not so much the fact that the notion, in its reappearance on the political stage, was initially the province of right-wing populism, but that it succeeded – in the second phase – to escape this hold and to migrate towards the centre. Only after common sense gradually liberated itself from its non-essential right-wing attributes could it become a central political category proper – not only an occasional talking point, not only an occasional reference supporting a particular political goal, but a true foundation of a re-configured political space.

¹¹ Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense. A Political History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) and London 2011, pp. 254–255.

However, taking the idea of common sense as the foundation, as the point of departure for a new political sequence seriously, amounts to recognising the possibility that it might advance in all the three main directions. It can well develop into a new version of right-wing politics, but it can also result in an unexpected reinvigoration of the centre (in the form of centrist populism, as represented by the Slovenian Prime Minister Šarec¹²) – or, why not, it might become the basis of a leftist political project as well.

As for Viktor Orbán, appealing to common sense – “*józan ész*” in Hungarian, which literally translates as “sound mind”, analogous to the German “*gesunder Menschenverstand*” or, for that matter, to the Slovenian “*zdravi razum*” – is by no means the final argument. When he refers to it, his message is not that from this point on we can dispense with all the intellectual effort and simply get things moving – as is the case in vulgar neoliberal politicians who basically see politics as the art of self-silencing (or the art of incessantly declaring the necessity of self-silencing), the aim of which is to enable the economy to flourish in full liberty. Orbán’s point is slightly more refined. After rediscovering the long-forgotten and, at least in part, intentionally suppressed elements of common sense – which only survived due to the extreme resilience of the few¹³ – the task should rather be to engage in a strange kind of *intellectual* fidelity.

What we call “liberal non-democracy” – in which we have lived our lives over the past twenty years – has come to an end. We can finally return to true democracy. We can return to straightforward and frank speech, freed from the paralysing constraints of political correctness; we can return to reality, we can honestly say what the problems of reality are. And we should not look for the answers to these problems through ideology, but through *pragmatic and rational creative thinking which is based on the foundations of common sense*. I am therefore convinced that

¹² Cf. Tadej Troha, “O sredinskem populizmu”, *Problemi*, 56 (9-10/2018), pp. 187–203.

¹³ In his *The Hungarians*, Paul Lendvai quotes an excerpt from an old history textbook for grammar schools: “In contrast to the scorn and slander of foreign scholars who portray our ancestors as blood-suckers or a barbarian mob, and who, through prejudice, ignorance or national antipathy make it their aim to denigrate our nation, every Hungarian can point with proud self-esteem to a natural constitution – *dictated by sober common sense*, what is more – as early as the ninth century, when better educated and happier peoples in Europe could not boast of a similar unity as a civil constitution.” Paul Lendvai, *The Hungarians*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2003, p. 17; emphasis added.

we are living through great days and great times. [...] I am also convinced that in recent months the entire European and Western world has taken some important steps towards an *intellectual transformation*.¹⁴

In the last few years, Orbán has provided numerous examples of how his model of “pragmatic and rational creative thinking, based on the foundation of common sense” should look like in action. For instance, after the decision at the beginning of 2016 by which Austria severely limited the number of immigrants it was prepared to take in, Orbán was quick to welcome the move. However, the praise of Austrians was coupled with a surplus of self-praise that marked the difference between *approaching* and actually *reaching* the level of common sense proper.

Common sense has prevailed, dogmatism has at last capitulated to reality and common sense, and decisions are finally being adopted which we Hungarians and several other European nations have seen as necessary right from the beginning; namely that we must finally state that Europe is unable to take in enormous masses of outsiders in an uncontrolled manner, without restrictions. This is the message of the Austrian decision. Their solution is that they have stated a number, the maximum number of people they are able to take in annually, and that is that. We Hungarians have a somewhat different view: *we think that the best immigrant is one who does not come here at all, and therefore the best number is zero*. Therefore, we pursue a migration policy which of course grants political refugees all the possibilities afforded by international law, but which does not allow anyone else in. The Austrians have taken a decisive step in this direction.¹⁵

This quote perfectly demonstrates the first facet of Orbán’s type of creative thinking, its *intensity* – that is, the readiness to push the already shared, the already ‘common’ common sense one step forward, to its very limit, to the point where nothing is left to tell. Here, Orbán’s triumph pertains to his skill of articulating ‘the truth’ behind the mask of a fabricated humanitarian standpoint, which, as a residual, persists also in the modified approach Austria has adopted. A deci-

¹⁴ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the conference ‘Reinvigorating Growth, Competitiveness and Investment – The EU from the Baltics, through Central Europe, to the Mediterranean’”, 10 November 2016; emphasis added.

¹⁵ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán interviewed on Kossuth Rádió’s ‘180 Minutes’ programme”, 22 January 2016; emphasis added.

sive step in the right direction was taken, and it was clearly affected by the pure common sense already attained in Hungary, but Austria nevertheless failed to achieve the clarity of simply *stating* the obvious.

“But has common sense really prevailed? Because the fact is that the Austrians have said this is only the first step. The most important politician related to this topic is not saying the same thing at all.” – “Yes, but we should also celebrate lesser achievements.”¹⁶

The following example exhibits another aspect of this oddly creative reactionaryism. Again, for Orbán, fidelity to common sense by no means implies that political communication should be reduced to the bare minimum of stating the obvious; having reached the zero point of common sense, the task is rather to invent discursive strategies to inhabit the sphere of the obvious, to contemplate the effects of allowing oneself to linger in the universe of the once forbidden frankness of thought. In the above-quoted speech given at the “Saint Martin and Europe” conference in November 2016 – the one in which he introduced the idea of “creative thinking” and the intellectual transformation that it strives to accomplish – he presented his account of the meaning of a pre-Hungarian, yet very Hungarian saint born in what is now Szombathely.

The second way in which he can set us an example – we heard the story earlier – is that, when serving in the Roman army, he saw a man shivering in the cold by the roadside, cut his cloak in two and gave half to the man. Many, including those who have spoken before me, interpret this story in terms of mercy – and with good reason. A politician, however, may also discover something else, something more. In the eyes of many of us today this act also qualifies Saint Martin as the patron saint of the social market economy, as it is in this act that *one can immediately see a spirituality which gives meaning to dry statements of revenue and expenditure*. Because, Ladies and Gentlemen, for us to give something to those who have nothing, we also need people who have something to give. We need committed people, businesses and government policy which have *both a heart and common sense*. No matter how infinite our heart may be when we see the suffering of others, our capacities will still have limits. This is why Martin gave the beggar only a piece of his cloak – a piece which was big enough for his needs. If my understanding is

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

correct, he gave him neither more nor less. Had he given away his entire cloak, he would have frozen to death on the road, and we would have no one to talk about today. The imperative to exercise mercy must never be equated with our own ruination. In the same way, we say that a country can only cut its coat according to its cloth. If we go beyond this – for whatever benevolent reason – it is only a question of time before it ruins the entire nation, because the economy will collapse. I believe that this is the message of Martin’s act for us today, together with the *second half of the great commandment which defines the honour of ourselves as the basis for the love we must show to our neighbours*: let us help, but according to our strength and capacities; let us help, but we should do so where the need arises, by always giving the needy their necessary and appropriate share. We can proudly profess these thoughts as deriving from the Christian roots and traditions of our policy. We can proudly profess that, thanks to these, for us social solidarity is not an abstract concept, but is tangible and rational behaviour. This is a joint mission in which the Hungarian government can rely upon the Catholic Church, as one of its principal allies. So let us be proud that we Christians learnt about the market economy not only from Adam Smith, but also from Saint Martin.¹⁷

In the former case, the dilemma between “heart and common sense” has been successfully sublated with the material act to close the borders, with objective heartlessness, as it were. Even though it holds up to the present time that “the fiercest struggles of recent years and the fiercest struggles of the years ahead are all related to migration,”¹⁸ there was no question whatsoever as to what had to be done first. Hence, the dilemma between the heart and common sense was successfully translated into a sequence of political actions that were completely managed by common sense; as for ‘heart’, it would only be produced in the end, as the final outcome of the seemingly heartless resolution.¹⁹ From this perspec-

¹⁷ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the conference ‘Reinvigorating Growth, Competitiveness and Investment – The EU from the Baltics, through Central Europe, to the Mediterranean’”, 10 November 2016.

¹⁸ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s address at the 9th meeting of the Hungarian Diaspora Council”, 14 November 2019.

¹⁹ The initial material gesture was fully subjectivised only in 2019, when he declared that his government is, purely and simply, an anti-immigration government. “You know the Hungarian position, so let’s tell it like it is: we have an anti-immigration government. It’s better that we say it – it’s said about us by others anyway, so let’s recognize it. We should focus more on analyzing what it means. [...] Hungarians can only be replaced by Hungarians. This is our perception, and so we’re anti-immigration, because we don’t want Hungary to

tive, it becomes clear why the migration crisis has been so alluring to Orbán. The fact that in this particular case it was possible to present the act of self-centred isolation as a prerequisite to addressing the global problem in a way that, in theory, was correct – to tackle the problem at the source, as the saying goes – offered him a model of action that appeared intellectually, as well as morally, superior to the alternative approaches.²⁰

However, as the peculiar reading of the Saint Martin parable clearly shows, the task becomes much more challenging as soon as one cannot resort to the initial negative gesture of isolation. Here, the dilemma between “heart and common sense” cannot be translated into a sequence of actions, but persists as such.

delude itself into thinking that it can solve its population decline without relying on its efforts. [...] Let's not choose an easy solution, as easy solutions lead one astray. [...] I'm bringing it up here because we take a tough stance on immigration, and a significant proportion of potential immigrants are indeed people in great need, people in difficult situations. This always raises a problem of conscience. We listen to the Vatican's standpoints in this regard, and we listen to our own: it doesn't feel particularly good to stop people in distress at the Hungarian border with very clear, firm determination and declare that according to international rules we will only allow in those whom we're obliged to admit under the Geneva Refugee Convention, and not economic migrants. This isn't a simple task. And the main thrust of the attacks is that we have hearts of stone, that we're not good people, and that we don't help people who need help. It's very important that on this we speak clearly, with crystalline clarity, and clearly state that Hungarians are good people, that this is a good country, a good nation, a nation that aspires to what is good. And we should state that our people are very receptive and indeed willing to take action in the interests of what is good – but in a different way from those who are pro-immigration. Our position is that help must be taken over there, and the problems must not be brought here. Because the solution is not to let in migrants, but to help them create a life worth living where they were born. This is why help must be taken over there, not problems brought over here. What I'm about to say now will be boring, but I will read out the individual acts of assistance that Hungary has provided to those areas experiencing migration outflows in recent years.” (“Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's address at the 9th meeting of the Hungarian Diaspora Council”, 14 November 2019)

²⁰ Drawing on Orbán's occasional philosophical aspirations, we might interpret his model of ‘objective heartlessness’ as a curious attempt at putting into practice the following lines: “[L]ove as inclination cannot be commanded, but beneficence from duty itself – even if no inclination whatsoever impels us to it, indeed if natural and unconquerable aversion resists – is practical and not pathological love, which lies in the will and not in the propensity of sensation, in principles of action and not in melting compassion; and only the former can be commanded.” (Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, p. 27.)

Therefore, for the common sense of objective inequality to ultimately prevail, it has to obtain the spiritual aura that pertains not so much to the act of sharing as to the mere *precondition* of sharing, to the mere having enough to share – when necessary. Since “for us to give something to those who have nothing, we also need people who have something to give,” the responsibility for keeping this spiritual procedure alive will have to be shared as well. “There should be some reciprocity, something that expresses mutual responsibility, whereby not only those who have something have a responsibility to give; those who do not have something, and who need to receive from others also have a kind of a responsibility.”²¹ Therefore, the only path enabling the “necessary and appropriate share” to gravitate towards zero while, at the same time, still being big enough for the needs of the one who receives it, is for the latter to gravitate towards becoming self-sustainable. Just as, in solving demographic problems, “the best migrant is one’s own child,”²² the best welfare is workfare:

The [issue] for Hungary today is now – it is a different country than the majority of the countries as the result of these renewal processes – it is not a welfare society, as we call it, it is a labour-based or workfare society. The social system is totally different. The target of the government is full employment. We do not pay social welfare if we do not receive something from the people in return. We have a flat rate income tax. We have probably one of the lowest corporate tax levels for small and medium-sized companies. We do not have an inheritance tax or anything similar. It is a strange combination. Ideologists are regularly in trouble when they have to define what it is exactly. It is like pornography: nobody knows what it is like, but when you see it, you know that is probably it.²³

To understand this peculiar combination that is Orbán’s Hungary, there is an additional ideological element we have to underscore. The infamous concept of illiberal democracy is, in a very precise sense, a political form of nationalist capitalism that does not rely “exclusively on individual interests, but instead

²¹ “Viktor Orbán’s address at the presentation of the discussion document ‘Signs of the Times’”, 30 October 2015.

²² “Speech by Viktor Orbán at the Atreju 2019 event held by the Brothers of Italy party (FdI)”, 21 September 2019.

²³ “Speech by Viktor Orbán at the Round Table of the Bratislava Global Security Forum”, 19 June 2015.

[...] regards the public good as being the most important.”²⁴ In this respect, Orbán’s pre-dated version of “America first” is essentially coupled with “ask-not-what-your-country-can-do-for-you-ask-what-you-can-do-for-your-country” model, promoted by a very different kind of an American President.

According to the liberal view, individual action and who does what – whether they live a productive or unproductive life – is a purely private matter, and must not be subject to moral judgment. By contrast, in a national system, action – individual action – is worthy of praise if it also benefits the community. This must be interpreted broadly. For example, there are our gold medal-winning skaters. An outstanding sporting performance is also an individual performance that benefits the community. If we talk about them, we don’t say that they have won Olympic gold, but that we have won Olympic gold. Their individual performances also clearly benefit the community. In an illiberal or national system, distinguished performance is not a private matter, but has clearly identifiable forms. Such are self-sufficiency and work, creating and securing a livelihood. Such are learning and a healthy lifestyle. Such is paying taxes. Such is starting a family and raising children. And such is orientation in the matters of the nation and its history, and participation in national self-reflection. It is such performance that we recognise, rank, look up to morally and support.²⁵

It was this intra-nationalist dimension, which was reintroduced after the intermission of the liberal-capitalist transition lasting a couple of decades, that gave birth to a new political subject – one which, paradoxically, transcends Hungary or Hungarians.

Becoming Central European

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If we follow Orbán’s account of history, the event that triggered the formation of the illiberal state model was the 2008 economic and financial crisis.

In Hungary we have developed a model of political and state theory, and we have built a state on this intellectual basis. We refer to the intellectual foundation of

²⁴ “Prime Minister on Kossuth Radio’s ‘180 Minutes’ Programme”, 15 August 2014.

²⁵ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the 30th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp”, 27 July 2019.

this as Christian democratic, and we call the state which is based on it a Christian democratic state. The following question arises: where did Hungary find the courage to take this upon itself? It happened like this because the way in which we interpreted the great 2008–09 economic and financial crisis in Europe was completely different from the way it was interpreted by the other Member States of the European Union. And we thought that the response that they gave to this crisis would be unsuccessful, because they misunderstood the true nature of the crisis. In the European Union they thought that the financial crisis was a routine cyclical crisis, of the sort that happens from time to time in the history of capitalism. This wasn't what we thought. We thought that the 2008–09 financial crisis was the sign of an epochal change in the world economy. Therefore, the reaction to it could not be the same as a reaction to a cyclical crisis: it needed to be reacted to as the sign of a great realignment in the world economy. [...] Therefore, we offered a different type of answer; and this gave rise to a Christian democratic political framework and a Christian democratic state.²⁶

Leaving aside the as yet still ill-defined notion of Christian democracy – which, as a positive determination of illiberal democracy, primarily serves the strategic purpose of taking over the term from those who have betrayed it – the general impression is quite striking in its de facto simplicity. In contrast to the majority of leftist politicians and theorists, who have somehow managed to let the event which, at that time, supposedly marked the end of capitalism, slip from memory, Orbán found a way to register the irreversible character of the crisis as such and, at the same time, avoid the immediate trap of overestimating its significance.

While the European left spent the first years of the crisis daydreaming about a global emancipatory movement, Orbán was busy building up his local focus. On the one hand, he was patient enough to remain in the opposition and let the left-centre block implode. In 2006, right after the elections, the then Prime Minister Gyurcsány's "Őszöd speech", was leaked,²⁷ followed by month-long

²⁶ "Speech by Viktor Orbán at the Atreju 2019 event held by the Brothers of Italy party (FdI)", 21 September 2019.

²⁷ "At precisely 4 p.m. on 17 September 2006, a mild late summer Sunday, a 'political nuclear bomb' exploded in Hungary. First the public service radio, then a little later every radio and TV channel as well as the Internet, started to broadcast excerpts from an audiotape on which could be heard the familiar voice of Ferenc Gyurcsány, who had been re-elected prime minister only the previous April. What he was saying was shocking; moreover, it

protests; in 2008, the newly adopted tuition and health fees were overturned at a referendum; in 2009, the new Prime Minister Bajnai was forced to adopt drastic austerity measures due to an over 6% decrease in GDP and the subsequent IMF loan.²⁸ Meanwhile, Orbán published an opinion piece in *The Guardian*, in which – perhaps surprisingly – there was not a single trace of criticism of the Hungarian government. Quite the contrary:

[A]fter all that has happened in the past six months, central Europeans can no longer look up to old countries representing the moral values of Western civilisation. This crisis was not caused by bad luck or some professional misunderstanding, but by character problems, especially in the US and later Western Europe. Money was stolen, not merely “mismanaged”. Investments were not simply bad, but unacceptably risky. The moral state of business leaders caused this crisis, and you cannot find central Europeans among those leaders. Central Europe has found itself in a completely new situation. Crisis management measures undertaken in the Western world are practically cutting our countries off from the EU market. In this situation, Central European countries must co-operate to defend their own interests, as well as their dream of a common Europe. The question for the European elite is whether we believe in the work of the past 20 years, whether we believe in an integrated European market and an ever-widening European community. If not, then first the biggest and the strongest countries, and then the central Europeans, will turn away from the European dream.²⁹

was in words that were both passionate and peppered with coarse expletives, language that the proverbial man in the street would instantly recognise: “We had almost no other choice [than the package of cuts] because we fucked up. Not just a little bit but totally. No other country in Europe has committed such stupidities as we have. It can be explained. Obviously we have been lying our heads off for the last one-and-a-half, two years. It was quite clear that what we were saying wasn’t true ... And in the meantime, we have, by the way, been doing nothing for the past four years. Nothing. You can’t name me one single important government measure we can be proud of, apart from pulling the government out of the shit again in the end [that is, after winning the elections]. If we were forced to give an account of what we’ve been doing in the past four years, what could we say?” (Paul Lendvai (2016), *Orbán. Hungary’s Strongman*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, chapter 7)

²⁸ Cf. Andrzej Sedecki, “In a State of Necessity. How has Orban changed Hungary”, *Point of View*, No. 41, April 2014, p. 19. Available at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/76797650.pdf> (accessed 10 November 2019).

²⁹ Viktor Orbán, “Blockades on Hungary’s Path”, *The Guardian*, 14 June 2009. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jun/14/hungary-communism-europe> (accessed 10 November 2019).

Se non è completamente vero, è ben trovato: at the very moment he was, one would dare to presume, completely engaged in preparations to take over the government for the third time, he was already envisaging the main battle line he would eventually draw in the international field, creating the outlines of the new political subject – the one called the Central European.

In the narrow – and more technical – sense, in Orbán’s vocabulary, the Central European refers to the collective entity composed of the member countries of the Visegrád Group. On many occasions, the V₄ countries are presented as a politico-economic block which, through intensive cooperation, has gradually established itself as a pan-national entity, but which essentially operates on the principle of synergy through diversity.

For us, this is a highly important framework for cooperation – not only because we seek to combine our individual strengths, but also because we learn a great deal from each other. I am convinced that the primary reason for this region’s success is that the leaders and businesspeople of these four countries are happy to learn from each other. For instance, we Hungarians are happy to learn from the Poles in relation to the family policy which they have very courageously introduced recently. We admire and respect the Czechs – and try to follow their example – for keeping the tax wedge as low as it is. And we also receive a great deal of inspiration from our Slovak friends, as they were the first in the region to seek to enforce a flat, pro rata policy on taxation. Central Europe – or let’s say the V₄ – has become one of the pillars of European growth, as well as one of the EU’s most promising regions.³⁰

In a more speculative sense, however, the Central European designates a collective *subject* proper, a political subject that is more consolidated, more singular and possibly applicable to a wider range of countries, possibly even the European Southwest. However, at the same time, the essence of the Central European is somewhat more Hungarian – formed by the Hungarian national character, Hungarian intuition, and Hungarian resilience. In this second characterisation, the Central European is, in short, the bearer of common sense – sometimes even the pseudo-material organ of common sense.

³⁰ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the Regional Digital Conference”, 17 November 2016.

[T]he past year has proven us right. I do not have a feeling of satisfaction, although it is of course good if time proves one right – much better than if it doesn't – but this is not a personal matter. I am glad that the Hungarians and the Hungarian government have been persistent enough to courageously represent our own approach, our own way of thinking, our own perception of reality, our own proposals and our own mentality [...]. And it is not easy to leave behind an image of Europe which is guaranteed to be successful and which is seen by everyone as the best in the world, and to step into a world in which everything is called into question. Are we still the best? Why is Europe's share of total global production falling? Why do demographic indices show Europe's population declining? Why are we experiencing everyday co-existence problems while living alongside migrants? Where is terrorism coming from? Is it just something that our enemies are importing, or does it also have roots here among us within our countries? These are questions which the people of Europe – Western European people over the past forty years – have not had to deal with before. And, as Central Europeans with razor-sharp instincts, when we were the first to say “Hey, this could lead to trouble, because there are ripples on the water and what is coming isn't something friendly,” then everyone said “You're stupid, you've only just become members of the European Union, you have no idea about this yet, it'll sort itself out. You don't have to make such a big deal of it, everything can just carry on as it has so far.” And now it has emerged that this is not the case. There were ripples on the water, it wasn't friendly and indeed it has led to dangerous waves crashing onto the shore; and now we need to hold on tight, so as not to be swept away. And now everyone can see this, and in fact they are saying, “Yes, sometimes even the Central Europeans can be right.”³¹

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Bearing in mind all the subjective and objective xenophobia this strange entity helped to produce, we nevertheless have to admit that the Central European, in a certain sense, was right. Just like the 2008 financial, economic, and fiscal crises, the 2015 migration crisis was far from being an ephemeral event that would allow the situation to sort itself out. The migration crisis – or the refugee crisis, as everybody still dared to call it back then – marked an irreversible change in the European perception of the issue that had been going on long

³¹ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's interview on the Kossuth Radio programme ‘Sunday News’”, 25 September 2016.

before the crisis was declared.³² Since 2015, the government rescue missions in the Mediterranean, such as Mare Nostrum, have become unthinkable – and furthermore the unmixed humanitarian position has been deemed utopian simply for refusing to comply with the soft-common-sense assertions of ‘reasonable’ limited capacities.

“Migration will not go away – it will stay with us,” confirmed the newly appointed President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in her first address to the European Parliament in November 2019. “Therefore,” she continued, “a Europe that is so proud of its values and the rule of law has to be able to come up with an answer that is both humane and effective.”³³ In this context, the “formidable team” of Margaritis Schinas and Ylva Johansson, “with their different skills and perspectives” – the former adopting the role of the humane heart, the latter of effective common sense – are just another, perhaps the ultimate, proof of the Central European foreseeing the future.

With all due modesty, but with the self-confidence acquired from the achievements of the past thirty years, and thorough acquaintance with the European situation, I can tell you this: thirty years ago, we thought that Europe was our future; today we see that we are Europe’s future.³⁴

From imitation to auto-imitation

However, in spite of several indications that prove Orbán’s rhetorical enthusiasm to be well grounded in the European reality, we should nonetheless be careful not to underestimate the resilience of the European core. As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes have argued, the “imitation game” that started in 1989 has

³² Cf. Tadej Troha, “The Undoing of the Refugee Crisis”, in: Žagar et al. (eds.), *The Disaster of European Refugee Policy: Perspectives from the Balkan Route*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, pp. 255–267.

³³ “Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme”, 27 November 2019. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_6408 (accessed 28 November 2019).

³⁴ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at an event marking the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution”, 17 November 2019.

come to an end – an end that was in the largest part forced precisely by Viktor Orbán’s political intervention.

To understand the origins of today’s Central and East European illiberal revolution, we should look neither to ideology nor to economics, but instead to the pent-up animosity engendered by the centrality of mimesis in the reform processes launched in the East after 1989. The region’s illiberal turn cannot be grasped apart from the political expectation of “normality” created by the 1989 revolution and the politics of imitation that it legitimized. After the Berlin Wall fell, Europe was no longer divided between communists and democrats. It was instead divided between imitators and the imitated. East-West relations morphed from a Cold War standoff between two hostile systems into a moral hierarchy within a single liberal, Western system. While the mimics looked up to their models, the models looked down on their mimics. It is not entirely mysterious, therefore, why the “imitation of the West” voluntarily chosen by East Europeans three decades ago eventually resulted in a political backlash.³⁵

While their analysis of the two shifts – the one in 1989 that initiated the imitation process, involving “democratization, liberalization, enlargement, convergence, integration, Europeanization” or, in short, “normalization,”³⁶ and the other, beginning in 2010, which marked the break with the paradigm – is quite remarkable, their conclusion possibly comes up a little short.

Europe today is haunted by the specter of reverse imitation. The players in the post-1989 “imitation game” are, at least in some respects, changing places. In a few cases, the mimics have become the models and vice versa. The ultimate revenge of the Central and East European populists against Western liberalism is not merely to reject the “imitation imperative,” but to invert it. We are the real Europeans, Orbán and Kaczyński claim, and if the West wants to save itself, it will have to imitate the East. As Orbán revealingly declared in a speech in July 2017,

³⁵ Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents”, *Journal of Democracy*, 29 (3/2018), p. 118. Available at <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/explaining-eastern-europe-imitation-and-its-discontents-2/> (accessed 20 October 2019).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

“Twenty-seven years ago here in Central Europe we believed that Europe was our future; today we feel that we are the future of Europe.”³⁷

Referring to an earlier version of Orbán’s enthusiastic prophecy we quoted above, Krastev and Holmes are right to infer that the negative gesture of terminating the imitation game has resulted in a kind of reverse imitation, in “changing places” between the mimics and the models. Furthermore, as we also demonstrated above, there is quite some evidence testifying to this process already having produced some early results in the way migration has come to be perceived (albeit one should be careful not to neglect the strictly internal Western motivation for the change of heart). However, precisely by taking Orbán’s prophecy at face value, and, as a consequence, by confusing “the specter of reverse imitation” with the reverse imitation directly taking place, they fail to acknowledge the possibility of another scenario.

In this regard, we should throw some new light on the most recent example of this procedure. When Ursula von der Leyen presented her vision for the new Commission, many were appalled by her decision to create a new post in her administration, dedicated to “protecting our European way of life.” In spite of all the critique from the Socialists and the Liberals, von der Leyen insisted on the decision by referring to the second article of the Lisbon Treaty and by, simultaneously, downplaying the importance of the fact that one of the key goals in the mission letter to Margaritis Schinas, who was appointed to the post, involved “finding common ground on migration.” Eventually, Schinas himself also stepped in to defend the decision – in the name of frank speech.

Shakespeare would have us believe that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but names are important because they give things meaning; they bring us meaning. And it means something to be European. At its core, being European means protecting the most vulnerable in our societies. It means healthcare and welfare systems that all can access. It means having the same opportunities. It means promoting culture and sport as core elements of our systems and equipping people with the knowledge, education, and skills they need to live and work in dignity. It means feeling safe on (sic) our homes, in our streets, and all of the places we like to meet, exchange, and experience life together. Being European

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

means being open to the world; extending heart and home to those who are less fortunate. It means standing up for these values, for these rights, for these principles across the globe. Being European means peace, freedom, equality, democracy, and respect for human dignity. On a very personal note, being European for me has meant living a European life, raising a European family, and dedicating 30 years of my life to European public service. I am nothing if not for Europe. I am proud to be European, and all the more so for having been given the unique opportunity to serve our union.³⁸

In addition, the never-to-become President of the Commission Manfred Weber suddenly spoke up and claimed to have used the now disputed phrase “very often in the last two years.”³⁹ However, all these attempts to normalise the decision have failed to address the real problem. Precisely as they tried to obscure the link to the issue of migration and saturated the notion of the European way of life with an infinite set of positive determinations, they ultimately revealed the truly obscene, almost ‘auto-erotic’, core of the idea – condensed in the essentially dispensable “our”.

Who, then, is the “we” of the “our”? In its initial phase, the gesture was a clear case of reverse imitation – since, in 2015, at least two years before Weber, it was Viktor Orbán who declared: “What is at stake today is Europe and the European way of life, the survival or extinction of European values and nations – or, to be more precise, their transformation beyond all recognition.”⁴⁰ Being the political pioneer of this idea, Orbán, of course, could not resist welcoming the decision of the new President, a “lady of substance” with “a bold mentality [...] who understands what is happening in Central Europe.”⁴¹

³⁸ Quoted from Anabelle Timsit, “Your questions about the new EU job for ‘protecting our European way of life,’ answered”, *Quartz*, 3 October 2019. Available at <https://qz.com/1721178/the-eu-job-for-protecting-our-european-way-of-life-explained/> (accessed 20 October 2019).

³⁹ Quoted from Cristina Abellan Matamoros, “Was von der Leyen the first to use the controversial ‘European way of life’ phrase?”, *Euronews*, 15 September 2019. Available at <https://www.euronews.com/2019/09/13/was-von-der-leyen-the-first-to-use-the-controversial-european-way-of-life-phrase> (accessed 20 October 2019).

⁴⁰ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s presentation at the 26th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp”, 15 July 2015.

⁴¹ “Exclusive interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán for Hungarian Television”, 1 August 2019.

Now, if the President of the Commission were Hungarian, rather than a German lady, we would not have called that position “protecting the European way of life”; instead we’d have called it “Commissioner for protecting Christian culture”. No doubt this would have brought the sky down. Even the term “way of life” is too much for some.⁴²

While, on the surface, pointing out the further step that needed to be taken, the satisfaction was unmistakable. The European rose may not smell so sweet as the Christian rose, but a rose is a rose, and our way of life is our way of life, whatever the predicate. And yet, at some level, Orbán’s triumph may be premature. When speaking at the EPP Congress in Zagreb – with Fidesz members not attending – von der Leyen joined some of her centrist-current colleagues in attempting to narrow the range of those who legitimately use this phrase.

I am proud to have Vice-President Margaritis Schinas from Greece in my team. He will promote our “European way of life.” There has been much debate on the title – our European Way of Life – as if there was any doubt about what our way of life is. We will never let the nationalists and the populists, who want to divide and destroy the European Union, hijack what our European way of life means.⁴³

The fact that it was precisely one of “the nationalists” who had embraced the phrase some years ago may, at first sight, seem to support the argument put forward by the President of the Commission. However, considering the intensity of the insistence on reclaiming the phrase that the allegedly purely European Europeans had previously not thought about using in the first place, the situation reveals itself to be far more obscure. The case here is rather a case of reclaiming what had been imitated, of re-appropriating what had never been of one’s own, of reversing the reverse imitation. The Central (or Eastern) Europeans might be the ones who noticed the need for the European way of life to be protected; the original imitators may serve as legitimate defenders of Europe against the people who lack even the will to imitate in the first place, but the decision on what Europe was, is, and will be – this decision should re-

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⁴² “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme ‘Good Morning Hungary’”, 15 September 2019.

⁴³ “Speech by President-elect Ursula von der Leyen at the 2019 EPP Congress in Zagreb”, 20 November 2019. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6315 (accessed 22 November 2019).

main the privilege of the founders. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that this seemingly absurd and extremely paradoxical procedure is taking place in the void at the very core of the European idea: once Europe was left with little normalising to do, once Europe was left with few mimics striving to imitate the normality it represented, it could only have turned inwards, and start to imitate itself. The process of *auto-imitation*, led by empty-shelled politicians inhabiting the timeless universe of *their own* private Europe – this process, precisely, will be the endgame of Europe.