The Theory and Practice of Plebiscitary Leadership
Weber and the Orbán regime

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Talking about the third wave of democratization, some fifteen years ago Larry Diamond noted ‘the unprecedented growth in the number of regimes that are neither clearly democratic nor conventionally authoritarian’ (Diamond 2002: 25). Since that time the literature on a halt or even U-turn in Central European democratization processes since the early 1990’s has also been growing (Jenne and Mudde 2012). Several authors have expressed their concern because of the Orbán government’s illiberal or antiliberal turn (Jakab and Sonnenvend 2013; Bánkuti et al. 2015; Csillag and Szelényi 2015), while others doubt whether democracy has survived at all in Hungary (Bozóki 2015; Kornai 2015; Ágh 2016). Forming a part of the literature on hybrid regimes, these papers compare the Orbán regime to the ideal type of liberal democracy, describing, analysing and evaluating it on those criteria. Thus, these articles about Hungary tell us in what ways and to what extent the Orbán regime has parted with the ideal of a liberal democracy, or in other words, what liberal democratic criteria they fail to meet, but they pay less attention to how the regime actually works. This is because the main research objective of the hybrid regime literature (Fukuyama 1989; 2014; Merkel 2004; Schedler 1998; 2002; Wigell 2008) is to empirically grasp and measure each regime’s diversion from the ideal type of liberal democracy. Based on the extent a regime meets the criteria of liberal democracy, this teleological approach places it on a continuous scale ranging from liberal democracy to closed autocracy.

Several researchers have cautioned that although from a normative perspective the approach that equates democracy with liberal democracy may be attractive and might help formal comparison, it is less helpful in understanding the regimes concerned. I will note three weaknesses of the hybrid regime literature.

First, as Fareed Zakaria (1997) warns us, this approach hides the basic contradiction between liberalism, which concentrates on individual freedoms, and democracy (c.f. O’Donell and Schmitter 1986). A more liberal regime is not necessarily more democratic. For example, Guillermo O’Donnell’s ‘delegative democracy’ is hard to understand in the teleological approach, as it is ‘more democratic, but less liberal, than representative democracy’ (O’Donnell 1994: 99).
A second weakness is that in the teleological approach, the hybrid regime is a residual rather than an independent category. O’Donnell holds that the teleological approach leads to a ‘conceptual bias’ when describing hybrid regimes ‘in a negative way’, concentrating on the lack of the features of liberal democracy. Thus, as he points out, the researcher’s attention does not focus on discovering and understanding the given regime’s nature (O’Donnell 1996). Levitsky and Way (2002: 52) add that the residual ‘semidemocratic’ category obscures significant differences between regimes classified as such, bringing highly diverse regimes together under one umbrella.

Thirdly, Levitsky and Way (2002) argue that the teleological characterization leads to the ‘democratization bias’, whereby hybrid regimes are regarded as temporarily stalled cases or U-turns on the trajectory leading to liberal democracy, as if they were ‘heading somewhere’. This may lead to inappropriate research questions.

Not denying the results of the approach based on the criteria of liberal democracy, for analysing regimes that do not fit the traditional classification, the present paper applies a theoretical perspective different from the teleological characterization used in the hybrid regime literature. My aim is to describe the Orbán regime through the actual features it demonstrates rather than those that it is lacking. I argue that Max Weber’s plebiscitary leader democracy model (PLD) is an appropriate framework for the theoretical analysis and empirical description of the Orbán regime (Weber 1978), and that by using Weber’s model we can get closer to portraying the special regimes that do not fit the traditional classification.¹

My paper has two objectives: Firstly, based on Weber’s texts I intend to reconstruct PLD as an ideal typical model. We will see that PLD is not a residual category. Nor is it an in-between state or a U-turn in the democratization process that many of the proponents of the hybrid regime literature assume to be teleological. I will demonstrate that this is an independent, sui generis regime type. PLD creates a Caesarist political rule: i.e. it is democratic in form, while in fact being an authoritarian system (Baehr 2008: 96-97).

The second objective of my paper is to show the analytical strengths of the PLD theory and to demonstrate its suitability for empirical research. Therefore, in the second part of my paper I will describe and analyse the Orbán regime in a structured case study, using the PLD theoretical and empirical framework. As will be shown, the main characteristics of PLD can be formulated in a way to be relevant also for empirical research. My main conclusion is that PLD offers a fruitful theoretical model for analysing a characteristic type of “grey spot” regimes that are different both from liberal democracies and authoritarian dictatorships. However, PLD is not in a halfway position between liberal democracy and authoritarian dictatorship (or closed autocracy) on the linear axis of ideal types. It should be interpreted in another dimension: the relationship of the three regimes may be better described as three points of a triangle.

¹ By ’regime’ I do not mean the constitutional or political system, but a special way of exercising power and a special mode of legitimising power. For the definitions of regime, see: Linz (2000) and Skowronek (1997).
The paper is structured as follows. The first part of the paper introduces Weber’s PLD model and its main features. The second part describes and analyses the Orbán regime in the PLD theoretical and empirical framework. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

WEBER’S PLEBISCITARY LEADER DEMOCRACY MODEL AND ITS MAIN FEATURES

Although Weber did not give a coherent explication of the PLD theory, we can reconstruct the conception and its main features from his writings. Weber closely builds the PLD ideal type on the notion of charisma. Thus, plebiscitary leadership is a routinized, institutionalized variant of charismatic rule.

“Plebiscitary democracy” – the most important type of Führerdemokratie – is a variant of charismatic authority, which hides behind a legitimacy that is formally derived from the will of the governed (Weber 1978: 268).

In other words, PLD is a subtype of authority where the substance of the leader’s charisma legitimizes his rule, whereas popular vote legitimizes its form. The six main features of PLD are as follows.

The first is the central role of charisma: PLD is characterized by a charismatic leader and the charismatic legitimacy of his rule. Unlike with traditional and legal authority, charismatic authority is based on some very special personal ability. Weber’s definition of charisma:

The term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or qualities. These …are not accessible to the ordinary person, but regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary… (1978: 241).

For Weber, ‘the power of charisma rests upon the belief in revelation and heroes…’ (1978: 1116). Another significant component of charisma is the leader’s declared vision for the future. Weber stresses that the basis of genuine charisma is not something objective or some objectively concrete substance. Charisma is a special relationship between the person exercising charismatic rule and those they rule: It is partly the ruler’s need for legitimacy based on the revelation of his special ability, and partly the perception of the ruler’s legitimacy by those subjected to it. Primarily, however, a person’s charisma is his ability to obtain the people’s recognition (Green 2010: 147).

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2 I am relying on the contemporary literature of the PLD theory only indirectly (Eliaeson 1991; Baehr 2008; Green 2010; Kalyvas 2002; Körösényi 2005; Pakulski and Körösényi 2012).
Charismatic leadership in PLD, as opposed to charisma in its original sense, has two main features. One is that PLD is a routinized and institutionalized variant of charismatic authority. Although the routine nature of PLD may lead to a weakening or disappearance of pure (or ideal typical) charisma, for structural reasons plebiscitary (democratic) elections still help the reproduction of charisma.

The second feature of leadership in PLD, as opposed to charisma in its original sense and based on revelation, ‘is a variant of charismatic authority, which hides behind a legitimacy that is formally derived from the will of the governed’ (Weber 1978: 268). As charismatic rule hides behind the form of democratic legitimacy, for the charismatic leader electoral victory is vital. The plebiscitary ruler’s charisma is manifested in winning over his rival party leaders. The foundation of charisma is the heroism ‘the dictator of the electoral battlefield’ (Weber 1994: 342) demonstrates in political rivalry. This is how the charismatic and legal legitimacy of leadership are connected.

Weber (1994) expected democratic institutions to inspire and strengthen the charismatic qualities of those who seek popular support. According to Green’s interpretation (2010: 143), a successful politician in popular democracy develops three qualities that help them approach pure charismatic leadership. He is primarily an expert on political struggles; his authority originates from his strength manifested in political fighting. In other words, this comes from the charismatic leader’s heroism in political struggle (Weber 1978: 1114). Secondly, he declares new values and responsibilities (Weber 1978: 243), and has a vision for his political community’s future. Thirdly, the democratically elected leader is personally responsible for his decisions and actions, which have to be successful, as the charisma has to be proved (Weber 1978: 242).

The second feature of PLD is its plebiscitary character. Similarly to his contemporaries, for Weber plebiscite meant direct popular decision making or, in other words, the popular vote (Baehr 2008; Green 2010: 122). Plebiscite implies a yes or no choice, accepting or rejecting a proposition to vote on. Looking at the issue theoretically, plebiscite in PLD means the institutionalization of the inevitably routinized charisma. When charisma turns into a routine, formally it takes on the guise of legality: it is manifested in recognition gained in formal elections that are conducted according to previously established rules. This is what Weber says about routinizing charisma:

...the recognition by the group becomes an ‘election’. The personally legitimated leader becomes leader by the grace of those who follow him since the latter are formally free to elect and even to depose him – just as the loss of charisma and its efficacy had involved the loss of genuine legitimacy (Weber 1978: 267).

This implies that in PLD, elections are formally free, and choice is regarded as an expression of recognition. Election victory legitimizes the leadership, thus it enjoys democratic legitimacy. However, my thesis is that formally free elections become similar to plebiscite in their substance, which gives PLD its authoritarian character. For if the ruler is truly
charismatic, in one way or another, this has already been proved. Thus, the difference between elections and plebiscite is blurred: in their actual substance, formal elections (guided by prior rules and involving competition) turn into plebiscite (popular vote) or the recognition of charisma in hindsight.

Plebiscite then means formalized elections, which however are not genuinely ‘free’. They mean the recognition or rejection of the person with charismatic qualities who exercises power or of the ‘pretender to the throne’ who demonstrates similar features (Weber 1978: 1125-1127). For Weber, plebiscite is one of the means of the modern (routinized) charismatic rule/authority that applies democratic forms. The leader gains and legitimizes his power through plebiscite (Weber 1978: 267). Ironically, election as an anti-authoritarian form legitimizes authoritarian (charismatic) authority/rule.

The third characteristic of PLD is that its emergence is associated with emergency or crisis situations. It has long been observed that peace or regular situations require different leaders than times of war or crisis. Weber also wrote about the ‘double rule’ when separate offices were established for peace times and for emergency and war times (1978: 1134). Weber argues that the emergence of ‘pure’ charismatic rule is always the outcome of a special situation: ‘charisma ……is immediately activated whenever an extraordinary event occurs’ (1978: 1134). An unprecedented situation requires leaders with outstanding talent and unique solutions. Only with particular abilities and heroism is it possible to control unusual situations, when the normal everyday routine is no longer sufficient. In Weber’s words:

Charismatic rulership in the typical sense … always results from unusual, especially political or economic situations, or from extraordinary psychic, particularly religious states, or from both together. It arises from collective excitement produced by extraordinary events and from surrender to heroism of any kind (1978: 1121).

The fourth feature of PLD is the revolutionary character of politics and policies. The charismatic ruler is not bound by traditional and rational norms, but ‘preaches, creates, or demands new obligations’ (Weber 1978: 243).

The bearer of charisma enjoys loyalty and authority by virtue of a mission believed to be embodied in him; this mission has not necessarily and not always been revolutionary, but in its most charismatic form it has inverted all value hierarchies and overthrown custom, law and tradition…(Weber 1978: 1117).

In these cases, a crisis or a reference to it may help establish revolutionary politics. Politics enjoys primacy over legal rule, bureaucratic regulations and social norms, thus weakening and disintegrating the bases of formerly observed norms of legal rule. Rulership becomes arbitrary, but charismatic legitimation covers up, or even justifies this arbitrariness. While purely charismatic rule re-evaluates everything, my argument is that in PLD, which is a mix of charismatic and legal rule, the legal legitimacy of rulership sets certain limits. A tension might develop between charismatic and legal rule. Not even legal rule and bureaucracy can
always stand in the way of the primacy of politics, but the formally legal legitimation of rulership demands that the revolutionary politics should take on a legal form. My argument is that in PLD, the plebiscitary leader - to a smaller or larger extent - violates, limits or overwrites bureaucratic norms, while in order to be able to exercise power, he also relies on them.

The fifth feature of PLD is that demagogy assumes a key role in political leaders’ communication with citizens. Unlike in the age of early parliaments, in modern democracies where elections require the candidates’ fight for votes of the masses, political leadership will inevitably be demagogic. In the words of Weber, ‘Democratization and demagogy belong together...’ (1978: 1450). As opposed to the more or less rational and objective tone and argumentation of 19th century parliaments, rhetorics today intend to stir emotions. As Weber noted, ‘(T)he more mass effects are intended and the tighter the bureaucratic organization of the parties becomes, the less significant is the content of the rhetoric’ (Weber 1978: 1129-1130). Weber argues that the demagogue with the charisma of rhetoric directly addressed the people (Weber 1978: 1126). He contends that Periclean democracy and late 19th century Great Britain were both characterized by plebiscitary democracy and the rule of demagogic political leaders (Weber 1994: 331, 343-344; c.f. Manin 1997). For Weber, demagogy and the plebiscitary nature of democracy are closely related: ‘The existing state of things well deserves the name of a “dictatorship which rests on the exploitation of the emotionality of the masses”...’ (Weber 1994: 343).

Finally, the sixth feature is that in PLD the nature of representation is modified in several respects. Primarily, the subject of representation is different, from a parliamentary representation of diversity, the emphasis shifts to the plebiscitary ruler that heads the executive, represents the people’s unity (its majority) and also occupies the incumbent position (c.f. Manin 1997; Körösényi 2005). The people is represented by the directly (or de facto directly) elected leader, who is the actual head of the executive, rather than by parliament or another chamber or representative body (Weber 1978: 267). In the case of charismatic rule, this is accompanied by representation becoming personal or personalized. Secondly, bottom-up representation is replaced by top-down representation (Körösényi 2005). While in traditional parliamentarism, representation meant representation before the monarch, or in other words, the representation of orders and constituencies, and the German Imperial Assembly embodying religious, class and group representation was also based on the bottom-up logic (representing the country against the monarch, or representing society against the state), in modern mass democracies (Weber regarded the USA and Great Britain as such) representation assumes a primarily top-down character. Where people elect not only parliament but also the actor representing the whole nation or political community, there he is the one that becomes the people’s primary representative. Thirdly, the plebiscitary leader controlling the executive power obtains a free mandate in elections, a blind authorization for governance. In western systems of representation, as early as the 18th or 19th century, imperative mandate was replaced by free mandate. The various interests have the outcome, says Weber, that 1[t]hey tend to treat the representative not as the servant but as the chosen

Summary

Giving a brief description of PLD, Weber argues that the substance of the leader’s rule is legitimized by his charisma, and its form by popular elections (Weber 1978: 266-268). As however, the charismatic legitimacy principle is ‘basically an authoritarian principle’ (Weber 1978: 266), PLD is a Caesarist political rule (c.f. Baehr 2008: 96-97) that is democratic in form, but authoritarian in its substance (c.f. Weber 1978: 266-268). The above analysis has shown three main characteristic of PLD as a regime type.

The first characteristic is that the democratic form has such guarantees as the legal regulation of elections and citizens’ equal voting rights, but above all, the fact that the leader’s legitimacy is the result of prior authorization originating from the people’s will and expressed in elections (Weber 1978: 266-277).

The second characteristic is that in PLD, the substance of rulership and of exercising power has an authoritarian character (Weber 1978, 266). I contend that these features can be grasped in the above detailed main characteristics of PLD, especially in the charismatic leader’s authority and in the leader’s arbitrary and revolutionary politics (which also invalidates norms and regulations) justified by the claim of an unusual situation.

The third characteristic is that PLD is a sui generis regime type. As opposed to the conventional interpretation, in PLD democracy and autocracy do not exclude each other, while they are not merely reconcilable either. They are types that are integrally interlocked and belong together in an endogenous fashion.

THE ORBÁN REGIME

The objective of this case study is to show how the Orbán regime can be described in the PLD theoretical and conceptual framework. I hypothesize that using the concept of the PLD regime, we can grasp character traits that are neglected by the traditional (public)law and institutional approach and by the typology of comparative political science. Let us now see how the features of PLD described earlier apply to the Orbán regime.

1. Charismatic leader and legitimacy

Orbán’s emergence as a charismatic leader had much preceded his 2010 landslide election victory; I would say it could be observed from the 2000s onwards, but definitely from the period following the 2002 elections.\(^3\) Orbán’s need for charismatic legitimacy is suggested not

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\(^3\) The literature repeatedly talks about Orbán’s charismatic features (Kiss 2016; Pappas 2014; 2016; Soós 2015; Enyedi 2016; Bozóki 2008; Szűcs 2015).
only by his motto that ‘the homeland cannot be in opposition’ but also by the image he had built of himself as a political leader representing the national interests and standing above the parties.\(^4\) Orbán’s charisma had also appeared as a public perception. It certainly contributed to his perception of being special that between the two elections, in 2002 he toured the ‘swing’ counties and in 2006 his personal campaign almost succeeded in turning his previous loss into victory. It also reflected the charismatic perception that despite losing the election in 2002, he managed to stay the head of FIDESZ and the undisputed leader of the right. His voters saw his charisma confirmed in the 2010 victory and in the 2014 two-thirds majority in parliament.

To what extent did Orbán demonstrate the three qualities that, based on Weber, Green (2010: 143) has identified: heroism, vision and a sense of personal responsibility?

\textit{(Heroism)} Indeed, Orbán’s charisma is partly due to his heroism demonstrated in political fights, as well as to his political vision stimulating millions, and to his outstanding election successes. Orbán was the leader who after Prime Minister József Antall’s death and after the Hungarian Democratic Forum-led coalition had lost the 1994 election, managed to reorganize the right, then united it and defeated Gyula Horn in the 1998 elections. Also, he maintained the unity of the right after the 2002 defeat, using a strong political offensive and thus keeping the Gyurcsány and the subsequent Bajnai leftist-liberal governments under political pressure between 2006 and 2010, and finally winning the ‘revolution in the voting booth’ in 2010.

Following 2010, Orbán’s heroism was manifested in the successful ‘freedom fight’ against the banks, the IMF and Brussels, in regaining the national sovereignty, in assisting those who had foreign currency loans and in cutting utility costs. And his most recent heroic deed was defending the national borders at the time of the 2015 refugee crisis.

\textit{(Vision)} The election defeat in 2002 was a strong break in Orbán’s political thinking. It was in the following years that he developed his political vision that has had a lasting effect on his thinking, even if it has not been rigid or dogmatic and has always adapted to the changing circumstances. In his speeches at the Bálványos Free Summer University, he talked about ‘the beginning of a new political and intellectual era’ (B-2007) and about the need for ‘a new interpretation of reality’ (B-2012). In his speeches, he often contrasts the new and the old world (e.g. B-2008), and has prophesied the eve of a new era, propagating new values. As opposed to extreme individualism and moral relativism, he emphasizes the role of the family, the community, the nation and Christianity (B-2007): ‘A nation is always more than a country’ (B-2008). The social (benefit-based) state is replaced by the work-based state and society (B-2011, B-2014).\(^5\) He believes in the nation rather than internationalism (B-2008), in state regulation and the idea of socialness rather than self-regulation (B-2009; K-2009), advocating the rule of the people rather than the rule of experts or the elite. The West no longer shows the way out of the crisis, as the West is the crisis itself; therefore Hungary has to find its own solutions (B-2011). Orbán’s vision offers a new interpretation of reality (B2012) according to which the financial crisis has merely made the decline of the West’s leading role

\(^4\) The citation expresses that the leader’s mission and the validity of his charisma are independent of election results.

\(^5\) ‘…rather welfare states, Europe will need a work-based social system’ (B-2011).
and neoliberalism manifest (B-2011), that the faith in ‘scientific socialism’ and the omnipotence of the market have proved failures on the national and the global scale (K-2009). In the politics of the new, right-wing era, the self-regulating market is replaced by the strong, regulating state (B-2009): the ‘social market economy’ has been rediscovered (B-2007). We are facing the age of strengthening nation states; the centre of the vision is the state’s economic and political sovereignty; the state is strong inside as well as outside (B-2011). In a speech given at Kőtcse, Orbán underlined that ‘the new government intends to organise the Hungarian community’s life on different bases’ (K-2009). Orbán has also claimed that in Hungary we are building ‘an illiberal state’ (B-2014).

(Responsibility) Orbán asserts that people, rather than institutions and principles, should govern, as ‘decisions are never made by principles or institutions’ (B2012), thus behind the financial crisis as well, there are personal decisions (B2012). The rule of institutions or the rule of law bears the liberal semblance of truth that covers up personal responsibility. Occasionally, Orbán refers to his own responsibility, and as a state leader, attributes a historical role to himself. At the same time, he often uses ‘we,’ attributing his own and his government’s decisions to the people. For example, he refers to the people’s ‘decisions’ in the revolution in the voting booth or in the national consultations, and also when he talks on behalf of a political community. His stance in these cases is of a populist character (c.f. Enyedi 2016). ‘Hungarians have established a new system today: the system of national cooperation’, he claimed in his victory speech following the 2010 parliamentary elections (Parliament-25 April 2010). This attribution to the people weakens Orbán’s personal individual responsibility, but does not completely do away with it, as it is based on the institution of voters’ democratic mandate and control, something that Orbán primarily builds his legitimacy on.  

2. The plebiscitary character

This section will examine the components of the Orbán regime’s plebiscitary character. The first point, which is the objective basis of the Orbán regime’s plebiscitary character, is the mandate and electoral legitimacy due to his election successes. Between the autumn of 2006 and the autumn of 2014, Orbán and his party won all the seven elections (two parliamentary, two European and three self-government elections). Therefore, it is not coincidental that from 2010 onwards Orbán often refers to the electors’ mandate as the legitimacy base of his rule.

The second component is the plebiscitary understanding (of the substance of) democratic elections. Here election is not an expression of recognition, not even merely the source of
democratic legitimation, but an expression of the people’s will, thus bearing a moral charge; the plebiscitary leader is an authentic representative of the people. Orbán has regarded elections as granting him authorization, a so-called personal mandate to govern according to the people’s will. The so-called personal mandate is obtained when electors proclaim their faith in a leader’s ability to act for the common good, rather than in a concrete program (Hershey 1994). This is how the new constitution was made, although it had not been among the election campaign promises. Another example of building on electors’ faith is that before the 2014 parliamentary elections, the only campaign promise FIDESZ had made was manifested in the motto “We are going to carry on”. In the latter case, the elections took on a purely plebiscitary character, turning into a referendum about the Orbán government.

The third component of the plebiscitary character is the use of referendums as means of legitimation, the two examples of which are the 2008 and the 2016 referendums. The 2008 social referendum was aimed at preventing the Gyurcsány government’s public policy reform and at weakening the government’s legitimacy. It succeeded. The 2016 anti-quota referendum against the EU’s mandatory refugee quotas intended to justify the Orbán cabinet’s migration policy. However, because it was invalid due to low turnout, it had mixed results for Orbán.

The fourth component of the Orbán government’s plebiscitary character is the direct communication and relation with the people, especially in the form of national consultations. In this framework, the prime minister sends letters to citizens, each time asking them about an important issue of public policy. The topics of the five national consultations between May 2010 and October 2016 were pensions, constitution-making, social issues (among them foreign currency debts of citizens), economic issues (among them the minimal wage) and finally immigration and terrorism. Although national consultations are similar to referendums, they lack the formal legal regulation, transparency and controllability, and their outcomes place no obligations on the government. This is a plebiscitary tool that the premier can freely apply and may arbitrarily use for legitimating his politics and public policy.

In summary, we can state that Orbán is a plebiscitary politician both in his mandate and his methods. It needs to be noted, however, that for a charismatic/plebiscitary leader public opinion and the plebiscite are not only resources and tools, but may also turn into obstacles. If the leader’s vision is opposed to the people’s dreams, it may weaken the leader’s charisma. The people’s opinions and expectations appeared as such obstacles for Orbán when, for example, he was forced to give up the idea of the Internet tax, and when he had to repeal the unpopular Sunday closure law. One trait of Orbán’s policy is that occasionally, especially in sensitive public policy issues, he becomes responsive. When his voluntarist leadership meets with public rejection, he backs down in a realist manner: under the pressure of public opinion, he makes political corrections. Overall, however, Orbán’s plebiscitary politics do not seem to be pandering to public opinion. He keeps the initiative to himself, trying to win the public over to his own political goals, while always bearing in mind the limits of shaping public opinion and always keeping an eye on election chances.

3. Unusual or crisis situations
Similary to the PLD ideal type, Orbán as a charismatic leader came to power in a crisis situation in 2010. Starting in 2006, there was an internal crisis in Hungary, which from the autumn of 2008 was aggravated by the global financial crisis. Then this was coupled by the public finance crisis and the foreign currency debt crisis, and in 2015 the Prime Minister had the migrant crisis in the focus of his political agenda. Orbán placed all this into a global crisis discourse, in his political vision he promised a way out, and between 2010 and 2016 he continuously governed as a crisis manager.\(^9\) Orbán said:

… these are not temporary financial problems, but a deep crisis of the system under which Europe has lived over the past hundred or hundred and fifty years. (…) In Europe, the thinking that the market would automatically bring along welfare and justice and that the state had better stay away from the economy has been a failure for European civilization (B-2010).

As we have reached the end of ‘the era of the West’ (B-2008), and the ‘western type of capitalism is in crisis’ (B-2010), Hungary’s position, according to Orbán, is radically different from what it was a quarter of a century ago. This global crisis narrative posits that the European Union’s institutions are incapable of giving answers to historical challenges (B-2013). The situation requires that Hungarians should seek their own national ways, and also justifies Orbán’s revolutionary steps and unorthodox public policy.\(^10\) It is a special feature of Orbán’s PLD that by using the crisis narrative creatively and by generating endogenous crises (Körösényi et al. 2016), for a long time he has managed to present himself as a crisis manager. During his premiership, the crisis narrative, the crisis government and the legitimacy demand based on them have been permanent.

4. The revolutionary character of politics

As a crisis manager with a political vision, Orbán has not been following the rules, practices and norms inherited, but has introduced new ones. The ensuing crisis situation has invalidated the political routines known earlier.

We have no one to copy, there is no recipe for success that would make our life easier here, in Transylvania or Hungary. We have to understand the situation and our problems, and we have to identify our troubles, and we have to find answers… (B-2012).

The revolutionary character of Orbán’s politics is unusual also in its scope and radicalism. It effects all three classic dimensions of politics, leading to major changes in all of them: it has transformed the relationship between parties and their voters, between leaders and their followers; it has created a new political language and way of doing politics (about the

\(^9\) ‘There is a new era emerging in the world…. the western world is shaken by an economic crisis…’ and ‘the Hungarian two-thirds revolution is one of the outcomes of this global change of eras’ (B-2011).

\(^{10}\) ‘If we have the courage to admit that it makes no sense to copy Western Europe, but that we have to build our own economic systems in the spirit of freedom, if we have the courage to admit this, then we have taken a huge step in the direction of success’ (B-2012).
dimension of politics, see the next point); has reformulated public policy, and has created a new polity. Beyond all this, he has retailed the relationship between the state and society.

In the policy dimension, with the help of his crisis narrative, he has applied revolutionary policies in several areas. He follows a new heterodox public policy, among others, in tax and budget policy (specific sectorial taxes), social policy and labour market policy (public works) (Szikra 2014) and foreign policy (opening up to the East). Revolutionary changes have affected property relations as well. Governance has made politically motivated interventions especially in the financial sector, in agriculture and in the media, whose impact is often far beyond policy efficiency. The objective of unorthodox economic measures is ‘to mete out justice’ (B-2013).

In the polity dimension, Orbán has centralised the state and reorganised its operation to an extreme degree. He has used the principle of the primacy of politics in constitution making, in retiring judges, being firm in regulating the Constitutional Court and in their nomination policies in general, as opposed to the rule of law. He has applied the same principle in strengthening political control over bureaucracy, and even in a major repoliticisation of public administration down to the middle level. Orbán’s politics has redrawn the relationship between the state and society, while state interference with the market sphere, the media, culture and other social fields has become more marked (Csillag and Szelényi 2015). The main objective behind these moves has been the vindication of a national-conservative set of values, and secondarily a politically driven, massive economic and cultural elite change (Kristóf 2015). The primacy of politics has also been manifest in making political appointments by placing the party faithful into the state sector and public administration, while state commissions have primarily been granted to companies close to FIDESZ.

We have seen earlier that in PLD, where charisma and legality are simultaneously present, there might be a tension between the revolutionary character of politics, the bureaucratic nature of the state and the regime’s legitimacy. In Hungary, this tension has emerged especially in authority conflicts, such as the conflict between the government majority and the Constitutional Court and other public institutions. Orbán’s supermajority in parliament, however, has enabled revolutionary politics and formal legitimacy to be harmonised, although accompanied by sharp conflicts.

5. Demagogy, populism, the relationship between the leader and the people

One feature of Orbán’s politics is that he has revived the relationship between the political leader and the electorate in several respects. Firstly, in rhetoric. He has been an acknowledged speaker ever since his speech delivered on the occasion of Imre Nagy’s 1989 reburial in Heroes’ Square, when he first demonstrated that he is able to talk about his political goals in a simple and comprehensible manner and to mobilize for their support. He has introduced a novel usage in Hungarian politics: he gave up the technocratic language that had dominated Hungarian political discourse from the Kádár era and switched to a colloquial style often

Orbán justifies this with the transformation of the ‘order of world powers’ (B-2011; B- 2013).
characterised by an emotional tone. Since 2002, mass rallies and his political speeches delivered there have played a major role. Orbán appears to be one of the Hungarian politics to use a demagogic political rhetoric that builds on emotions and prejudices. His declarations, for example, about the bank tax, the 98 per cent special tax, the utility cost reduction, the package for saving people indebted in foreign currency or about the migration crisis have been characterised by a marked presence of demagogic and populits elements (such as being against the elite and creating an enemy image).

Secondly, as a political leader, following his election defeat in 2002, Orbán started building a new type of relationship with the people. Unlike mediating organisations, he emphasizes communication and contact with his electorate: ‘populism as a process and linkage’ (Mair 2002: 88–89) has become one of Orbán’s frequently applied political means. While Orbán’s politics has intended to lessen the weight of bottom up mediating organisations, he has given a more prominent role to ‘austroturf’ (or: top-down) movements. Thus, in 2002 he established the Civil Circles Movement, which some two hundred thousand people joined within a year. In 2009, the ‘civil’ organisation, the so-called Civil Union Forum was established from above to support FIDESZ and to hold political rallies. He has been regularly using the tools of direct democracy, among them referendums both in opposition (2004 and 2008) and in government (2016), the so-called national consultations where citizens are directly addressed concerning issues of public policy and institutional reforms. These national consultations have worked as informal referendums: in personal letters sent out to citizens the prime minister queries citizens about their opinion on political issues considered significant.

6. Representation and its character

Similarly to the ideal type in PLD, in the Orbán regime the direction of representation has changed: the bottom-up representation built on a descriptive understanding of classic representation (Pitkin 1967) has been replaced by top-down representation (Körösényi 2005).

The people’s will is represented by the plebiscitary leader, who as the head of the parliamentary majority conveys it to the legislative, as well as to internal and external policies. When confronting a civil actor or interest group assumed to be against the public interest, in his speeches, Orbán has often referred to the people’s will and to his election mandate.12

Since the 2000s, the political thinking of FIDESZ and Orbán have hardly shared the traditional image and concept of parliamentarism that parliament is the arena where different views and interests are represented and consensus or compromise is reached between them.

12 In the night following the victory on 25th April 2010, Orbán said: ‘Finally, modestly and in humiliation, we send the message to Hungary’s citizens that we understood and made victorious the eternal dream of Hungarians. Vincit voluntas tua! Let your wish be victorious!’ (Parliament-25 April 2010). This is to say that the people’s word is God’s word, and the political leader’s mission is to recognise and execute it.

Most frequently, Orbán has justified revolutionary politics with the victory in the polling booth and the people’s will expressed in it, as well as with the political mandate thus obtained. See, for example the speeches made in the night following the victory on 25th April 2010 (Parliament-25 April 2010) and the one delivered in Parliament on 25th May 2010 (Parliament-25 May 2010).
At the time of the first Orbán government, the main emphasis was on government efficiency characteristic of the concept of governmentality, but since 2010 has shifted to the representation and execution of the people’s will. We are a constituent assembly and a regime-changing parliament, Orbán declared when introducing the government program in parliament. In his interpretation, the electorate have granted him a regime-changing mandate:

The authorization I have obtained from my electors is not merely for managing the crisis and warding off the economic emergency, but for winding up the flawed and incomplete economic and political system of the transition period, creating a new system, doing away with old axioms, rules and instincts and establishing new ones; in other words, a revolutionary change. (Parliament-25 May 2010)

Here the people’s will was formulated by the plebiscitary leader himself, who as the head of the legislative carried it out, relying on his power as party leader and the disciplined FIDESZ parliamentary fraction. Thus, the decision is taken by the people, while representatives only acknowledge the decision and execute it in the next parliamentary cycle. However, because the people’s decision can be interpreted only in relation to the party’s election program, and in the 2010 and 2014 government cycles, both the scope and radicalism of the government’s activities went far beyond the 2010 election program (where for example, the introduction of a new constitution did not feature), following Orbán’s interpretation of his mandate, representation was of a largely top-down character. This understanding of representation was reaffirmed by the 2014 parliamentary elections, which he fought with the ‘We are going to carry on’ motto rather than with the FIDESZ party program. This completed the free interpretation of ‘mandate’, i.e. understanding representation as authorization (accountability) (Körösényi 2005; 2015).

Summary

This case study has demonstrated that Orbán is not merely a charismatic leader but also a leader elected in a plebiscitary manner, applying plebiscitary means and political demagogy. He won his democratic mandate in formally competing and plural elections (procedural democracy), but as a charismatic leader he takes a dominant position in Hungarian political life, and opposed to his rivals, he stands out asymmetrically. His dominant position is further strengthened by his party’s politically central position (as his opposition is divided, placed on the two extremes of the right-left scale) developed by 2010, which is well reflected by the phrase coined as the ‘central field of force’.\(^\text{13}\) Orbán came to power in a crisis that legitimated exceptional governance; through his creative crisis narrative and through a continuous maintenance of the (perception of) the crisis, he has made political voluntarism permanent, i.e. special revolutionary politics and policies whereby politics enjoys primacy over the law and unwritten traditions and norms. All this, coupled with the strengthening of the top down character of representation has resulted in an in exercise of power that is in many ways

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\(^{13}\) The phrase was coined by Orbán himself (B-2009).
authoritarian. Unlike the autocracy of the Kádár era, Orbán as a plebiscitary leader has acquired and maintained considerable mass support even as an incumbent: his legitimacy is based on his repeated election victory and the recognition of his (public)policy. Due to the centralized character of the FIDESZ party mechanism, the practical weakening of any power against the government, and the unprecedented centralisation of the state, since 2010 Orbán has developed into a ‘plebiscitary dictator’.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on Weber’s texts, the present article has first reconstructed the ideal type model of PLD and, second, has introduced the relevance of the model through an empirical case study. I think I have managed to demonstrate firstly, that Weber’s writings enable us to construct a coherent model of PLD, and secondly that this model will be a suitable conceptual-analytical framework for empirical regime research. In the theoretical part of the article, I have emphasised, in harmony with Peter Baehr’s research, that it is an underlining feature of PLD that its legitimacy is democratic in form, but is authoritarian in substance, while in other aspects too it carries both democratic and authoritarian features. It is hard to overestimate the significance of this finding for political theory and comparative (empirical) regime research. My results can be summarised in the following points.

(1) The significance of PLD in political theory is not only that it refutes the conventional approach of diametrically opposing democracy and dictatorship, since we already know from the hybrid regime literature that democracy and autocracy are not irreconcilable. However, while in the hybrid regime literature this is an outcome of the pathological conjunction of things, in PLD this is an endogenous feature of the regime, which is supported by theoretical coherence. Paradoxically, in PLD it is the plebiscitary election as an anti-authoritarian form that enables or acknowledges authoritarian leadership, as by electing a leader, his demand for power is acknowledged (e.g. Weber 1978: 1129). Our case study has demonstrated that Orbán interprets his election as a personal mandate.

(2) Secondly, it is an important feature of PLD that it is not a regime originating from a politician’s temporary or ‘transitionary’ deviance or from some derailing of political processes, the way some of the hybrid regime literature looks at the regimes as ‘stalled in their democratisation’ or as U-turns. This is partly because Weber explains the emergence of PLD with structural reasons, namely with the logic of mass democracy. And secondly, because due to the routinisation of charisma, PLD loses its temporary or transitionary character and develops into an institutionalised regime. In sum: PLD is an independent, sui generis regime type. The significance of PLD for comparative regime research is that it offers a fruitful theoretical-conceptual framework for studying regimes different from both liberal democracies and authoritarian dictatorships. It is hoped that the case study has managed to

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14 Between 2010 and 2016, the primacy of politics and the authoritarian exercise of power hit the sophisticated institutional system of procedural democracy (Dahl’s poliarchy), but competitive elections with rival parties were maintained.
grasp the ‘positive’ features of the Orbán regime, thus demonstrating the applicability of the approach.

(3) Thirdly, the case study has demonstrated the most important characteristic of PLD, as discussed in the theoretical section: the Orbán regime is a regime where parallel with democratic elections and legitimation, authoritarian rule and exercise of power emerges. The authoritarian character of the Orbán regime has two major, interrelated components. One is related to the leader’s charisma and the plebiscitary nature of his mandate (the input side), which can be grasped in the relationship between the leader and the people. The other is related to the authoritarian, but at the same time legitimate, nature of exercising power (the output side), which can be grasped in the primacy of politics over law and other spheres, in extending the state’s competence, in the one-person centralisation of political power and in the political voluntarism of leadership.

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B-2008 – B and the date refer to the speeches made every summer at the Bálványos Free Summer University (e.g. B-2008 = Orbán’s Bálványos speech in 2008). Source: http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/beszed/.

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