

BOOK REVIEW

Civic and Uncivic Values in Hungary: Value Transformation, Politics, and Religion.
Edited by Sabrina P. Ramet and László Kürti. (Routledge, 2026)

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Examines civic values in contemporary Hungary, particularly under Viktor Orbán's rule. The volume frames civic values rooted in principles such as the rule of law, tolerance, and individual rights as foundational to liberal democracy and argues that these have been eroded in Hungary's evolving political order. The chapters are structured into four parts: 'The system', which addresses institutional and political transformations; 'Values', which situates Hungary within comparative and European contexts; 'Culture, gender, and history textbooks', which explores how values are reproduced and contested socially and culturally; and a concluding chapter that synthesizes the findings. This organization presents a multidimensional account from political institutions to everyday practices and cultural representations.

The book conceptualizes political change as a process of 'autocratization' shaped by transformations in political institutions and civic norms. In Chapter 2, 'Politics in Hungary: Two critical junctures', András Bozóki and István Benedek trace the transformation of Hungary's political system through two key moments: the crisis of the late 2000s and the consolidation of power after 2010. They show how these junctures enabled the emergence of what they describe as a populist electoral autocracy, characterized by formally competitive elections but substantively uneven political conditions. Their analysis links structural changes, such as constitutional revisions and the weakening of checks and balances, to broader patterns of political competition and public discourse. By situating Hungary within debates on populism and hybrid regimes, the chapter provides a conceptual basis for the book.

The book is attentive to the role of media in shaping civic and uncivic values. Chapter 3, 'The Hungarian media system: Unequal worlds', by Attila Bátorfy, documents the concentration of media ownership in pro-government hands following 2010. It details how public media and segments of the private media market were brought under political influence, often through indirect mechanisms such as acquisitions by allied business actors and the creation of centralized foundations. Rather than presenting this as simply a matter of censorship, Bátorfy emphasizes that the restructuring of the media landscape produces an asymmetrical public sphere in which pro-government narratives dominate. This analysis illustrates how institutional change is reinforced through control over information and representation.

The book is grounded in survey and comparative research on civic attitudes. In Chapter 4, 'Hungarian civic values in a European context', Kristen Ringdal uses data from the European Values Study to analyze social trust, political participation, and tolerance in Hungary in comparison with other European countries. By placing Hungary in comparative perspective, Ringdal points to relatively low levels of confidence in political institutions and limited participation in

voluntary organizations, while highlighting regional patterns and country-specific developments. This perspective shows that while some trends reflect broader post-socialist legacies, others are more closely tied to recent political developments.

The book explores the relationship between religion, minority politics, and national identity. In Chapter 6, 'Illiberalism and popular religion in Hungary: State Christianity', László Kürti explores how religious discourse has been mobilized to support an illiberal political project. He argues that the state's alignment with a particular vision of Christianity legitimizes exclusionary policies and reinforces a moralized conception of national identity. This is complemented by Chapter 7, 'Antiminority prejudice in Hungary: Gypsy business – Roma politics', also by Kürti, which addresses the persistence of anti-Roma sentiment and its political uses. Together, these chapters demonstrate how religious discourse and minority politics serve as sites through which uncivic values are constructed and maintained.

The third part of the book turns to cultural and social domains, showing how values are reproduced beyond formal politics. Chapter 11, 'Polarized society in an illiberal polypore state: Values and attitudes among Hungarian women voters', by Balázs Böcskei and Andrea Pető, examines gendered political attitudes. The authors identify a divide between pro-government and non-government women, with the former exhibiting strong right-wing and conservative self-identification. This finding complicates assumptions about gender and political preferences, suggesting that support for illiberal politics cuts across social categories. Similarly, Chapter 12 on history textbooks illustrates how state-sanctioned narratives reshape collective memory and embed value orientations within society.

The volume is not without limitations. At times, the connection between empirical findings and the concept of civic versus uncivic values could be more explicitly developed. In addition, the focus on Hungary and Europe limits its engagement with wider comparative debates beyond Europe. More comparisons with cases outside Europe would have strengthened the book's broader relevance. Nevertheless, the volume offers a nuanced account of value transformation in contemporary Hungary and contributes to discussions of democracy and its erosion in East Central Europe. It shows how changes in political institutions, media structures, and cultural practices interact to reshape civic norms. The book will be relevant for researchers and students in political science, sociology, European studies, and contemporary history. Its clear structure and interdisciplinary approach also make it a suitable addition to course reading lists on democratization and illiberalism.