Central and Eastern European Migration Review
Received: 23 September 2024, Accepted: 27 June 2025
Published online: 15 July 2025
Vol. 14, No. 2, 2025, pp. 55–70
doi: 10.54667/ceemr.2025.10

Hybrid Regimes and Transnational Practices: The Illiberal Turn in Hungary's Post-2010 Kin-State and Diaspora Engagement

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This article analyses the changes that have occurred in the nature of Hungary's transnational engagement with both its cross-border and wider global diaspora in the years since 2010. State actors and policymakers in Hungary have shifted towards embracing a 'global nation' framework that encompasses relations with long-established migrant diasporas, and coethnic Hungarian minority communities in neighbouring countries. This shift has created an increasingly complex institutional environment and changed how and why states like Hungary preferentially target or exclude members of their diaspora, with more focus on finding loyal diaspora members within communities rather than differentiating among different types of external communities. Hungary's diaspora engagement has become deeply intertwined with the Fidesz party's attempt to maintain and legitimise incumbent control through a widening menu of illiberal and non-democratic practices, which I term 'illiberal transnationalism'. This illiberal transnationalism has been produced, I argue, by the evolution of Hungary into a hybrid regime with highly constrained political competition. Almost 15 years of single-party rule since 2010 in Hungary has created a much more closed, more ideological, and less transparent policy system. The nature of the Hungarian political regime has, therefore, had a significant impact on the structure and content of its transnational practices, suggesting that scholars of kin-state politics and diaspora engagement need to pay more attention to regime type in their analyses.

Keywords: Hungary, kin-state politics, diaspora politics, hybrid regimes, illiberalism

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Introduction

Hungary has long been one of the most activist kin-states[1] in Central and Eastern Europe, with a long-standing commitment to help preserve and promote the communities of ethnic Hungarians living as minorities in neighbouring Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine and a series of intensifying cross-border projects in the years since 2010 (Bárdi 2020). The expansion of Hungary's policies towards its ethnic diaspora in the region has ranged widely, from the introduction of non-resident ethnic citizenship and voting rights (Pogonyi 2017; Waterbury 2014), to substantial subsidies in the areas of Hungarian minority cultural, educational, and media institutions, and finally, the economic sector (Kiss 2022). In addition, since 2010 Hungary has caught up to much of the rest of world and the broader region in developing specific policies to engage its broader global diaspora (Lesinska and Hejj 2021; Sendhardt 2021), with diaspora engagement now encompassing relations with established migrant diasporas, kin-minorities across the border, and 'post-accession' diasporas throughout Western Europe (Lesińska and Popyk 2021). For example, in March 2022 two Hungarian-government research institutes co-organised a conference titled 'Diaspora Policies in the 21st Century: New Answers for New Challenges', which brought together speakers from a variety of countries in the region to discuss support for and outreach to many different external national communities, from 'constituent Croats' in Bosnia, to Slovene national minorities, to 'autochthonous Serbs' in neighbouring countries, as well as to various emigrant and diaspora communities outside the region. In opening remarks, Árpád Potápi, the Secretary of State for Hungarian Communities Abroad, argued that the Hungarian nation had only been 'reunified' since the Fidesz government developed the first Diaspora Council after it came to power in 2010.[2] Other Hungarian representatives uttered the widely-used slogans that 'every Hungarian counts' ('*minden magyar számít*'), and that 'every Hungarian child is a treasure to the Hungarian nation'.[3] Other Hungarian political actors have stated that 'there are no Category A and B Hungarian citizens... All Hungarians are equally important to us, wherever they live' (Tóth 2020).

This discursive and policy shift towards a global nation strategy occurred as emigration to West European countries has increased throughout the region, creating fears of demographic decline and as migration out of ethnic minority areas has increased, facilitated in part by access to kin-state citizenship (Pogonyi 2017). This has prompted kin-state policymakers to deal with – and attempt to mitigate – the mobility of national members beyond their borders and has made emigrating national minority members part of the kin-state diaspora in many cases. Most crucially, however, there is a growing awareness of the importance of diaspora engagement and the need for states to access and control the cultural, symbolic, lobbying, and economic resources represented by established diaspora communities throughout the world. States representing 'divided nations' in an increasingly mobile and demographically shifting region must deal with multiple types of external communities and can no longer give attention to only kin-minorities or one type of diaspora (Waterbury 2020b).

However, this unifying discourse also masks a number of tensions and problematic outcomes that have emerged as Hungary's diaspora engagement practices have developed and its cross-border engagement with its minority communities has intensified since 2010. The first surrounds whether the diaspora communities are seen as partners in shaping transnational relations or as passive recipients of the state's largesse. As Gamlen (2019) argues, states may 'embrace' and 'tap' the diaspora as resources by actively trying to cultivate economic and political ties that would benefit the homeland as well as the diaspora members. Conversely, the state may see its role more paternalistically and use its resources to 'help' diaspora communities by providing resources with little space for open discussion of how those resources are used, and what the diaspora might offer in return. The research I conducted in 2022

suggests that Hungary's policies favor the latter approach of keeping more control of support given to the diaspora without discussing the expectation of concrete 'returns' on its investment. This is despite the fact that some diaspora members would like to be seen more as partners in this transnational relationship.[4] This paternalistic approach by the Hungarian regime has also allowed it to expand its illiberal views and clientelistic networks into the Hungarian minority communities in neighbouring countries, leading to what some critics have called the 'diasporaisation' of the cross-border communities (Kerényi 2024). Diasporaisation in this case constitutes a critique levelled at the Hungarian regime's increasingly heavy-handed influence in the Hungarian minority communities, often by members of those communities, that Hungary now seeks to 'govern' its coethnic diaspora, rather than seeing them as partners in the struggle for minority cultural rights and political representation at home.

The second aspect relates to how transnational policies and practices construct and reproduce 'differential treatment (...) of various communities within a diaspora' (Délano Alonso and Mylonas 2019: 475). In order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the targeting of different segments of the diaspora, we need to better understand what kind of diaspora the state is seeking to promote and construct, the types of transnational projects the state is promoting, and the tools it uses in its diaspora engagement. State policies and approaches are not being parsed just between cross-border kin communities versus global diaspora communities, but between elite versus everyday diaspora members, those with varying levels of cultural and linguistic knowledge, those with or without access to political patronage networks, and those willing or not to 'perform' national identity in the manner preferred by the homeland state government. As I explain in more detail in the final section of the article, the Hungarian government since 2010 has intensified its political and ideological penetration into the cross-border Hungarian communities, using three primary tools: 1. The co-optation of Hungarian language media; 2. Increasing levels of financial support in a growing number of areas, from culture to language to economic development; and 3. The construction of organisations and institutions that function as tools of political socialisation. Together, these tools construct a robust network of transnational clients dependent on the Hungarian government, and orient public opinion and political discourse within the ethnic diaspora communities to align with the priorities of Budapest. This clientelistic, centralised, and state-centric approach to the cross-border diaspora has then been replicated to some degree in the development of Hungary's increasing engagement with its global migrant diaspora outside of Europe. Programmes privilege those segments of the diaspora that display identity and political loyalty to Hungary, and the specific needs of different diaspora communities are largely subsumed to the broader goals of the Hungarian government.

The article argues that this illiberal transnationalism – the increasingly illiberal and non-democratic practices that have come to characterise Hungary's diaspora engagement – has been produced by the evolution of Hungary into a hybrid regime with highly constrained political competition. Almost 15 years of single-party rule since 2010 has created a much more closed, more ideological, and less transparent policy system. As I argue below, the nature of the Hungarian political regime has had a significant impact on the structure and content of its transnational practices, suggesting that scholars of kin-state and diaspora engagement need to pay more attention to regime type and the political context of the policy process in their analyses. The next section lays out the relationship between regime type and diaspora policies in the literature, focusing on the specific characteristics of hybrid regimes and the types of transnational policies and practices they tend to produce. In the final sections I draw upon research conducted in Hungary in 2022 and subsequent analysis of Hungary's kin-state engagement and global diaspora outreach to illustrate how the policies produced by Hungary's hybrid regime has

impacted its engagement towards ethnic Hungarian communities in neighbouring countries, as well as its broader approach to global diaspora management.[5]

Hybrid Regimes and Transnational Practices

Regimes of all types, be they more or less democratic or authoritarian, seek to engage their diaspora populations. Different kinds of regimes instrumentalise diasporas and increasingly seek to 'govern' them through institutions of transnational outreach, offering special benefits, and expanding external citizenship and enfranchisement (Umpierrez de Reguero, Yener-Roderburg and Cartagena 2021) in exchange for political and financial remittances. More or less democratic regimes may also 'securitise' diaspora populations, seeing them as either threats or under threat, and therefore in need of protection by the state (Abramson 2024). There are important differences, however, in how different types of regimes engage their diasporas. In democratic regimes, we would expect there to be more pluralism, competition, and transparency in diaspora policymaking. Democratic political competition brings policy debates into the open, provides more transparency about what kinds of programmes and which diaspora actors are being funded, mitigates against policy capture by one set of political actors, and provides more space for political voice and participation by diaspora members (Gherghina, Tap and Soare 2022; Paarlberg 2019). Together, these factors make extremism, patronage, and corruption in diaspora policymaking less likely or at least less impactful. While some political actors will want to co-opt and use diaspora engagement and transnational networks for their own strategic ends, real political competition 'will constrain the most dangerous forms' of instrumentalising external kin communities (Waterbury 2010: 3). On the other end of the spectrum, we know from the growing literature on diaspora engagement by authoritarian regimes that 'extraterritorial authoritarian practices' (Glasius 2017) involve a much higher degree of co-optation, enforcement of ideological hegemony, and repression of external populations. Diaspora members that are willing to support and legitimise the regime, either through the enforcement of loyalty or in exchange for patronage are lauded by the regime (Orjuela 2023), while those who are critical face a range of 'transnational repression' techniques, including surveillance, threats, coerced return, coercion-by-proxy, lethal retribution, and disappearances (Moss 2016; Tsourapas 2019).

Hybrid regimes possess aspects of both authoritarian and democratic regimes, but also include some unique characteristics. Hybrid regimes have democratic rules in place and allow elections to be conducted, but those rules are frequently and systematically violated or partially replaced with 'hypermajoritarian strategies' (Levitsky and Way 2020), leading to unfair political competition and weak, poorly functioning liberal institutions (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018). In addition, leaders of hybrid regimes are more likely to utilise populist and ethnonationalist strategies (Levitsky and Way 2020) to justify the weakening of liberal institutions, limits on majoritarianism, and the curtailing of competitive politics while legitimising continued governance by the incumbent. Hybrid regimes may also rely increasingly on patronalism and clientelism to maintain incumbent hegemony (Magyar and Madlovics 2020) by limiting spaces of 'autonomous existence' and encouraging dependence on the regime, what Enyedi (2024) has called 'paternalist populism'. The existing literature provides less guidance on how the unique characteristics of hybrid regimes translate into diaspora governance and other extraterritorial strategies and outcomes (Karabegović 2024). Drawing on the parameters of hybrid regimes described above and recent work done by scholars of cases such as Turkey and Hungary, I highlight below the three aspects of hybrid regimes that are most impactful in terms of how they engage diasporas and coethnics in neighbouring countries.

The first involves attempts to limit political and ideological competition through institutional policy capture, curtailing independent press and media, remaking electoral rules and districts to favour incumbents, and weakening independent civil society organisations. Hybrid regimes may place diaspora engagement policymaking out of the reach of legislatures by locating it under new cabinet positions or the control of the MFA or the Prime Minister's office. These institutional moves prevent access by opposition parties to diaspora policymaking, further reinforcing messages that external outreach is 'owned' by the incumbent party and is too important to be subject to partisanship. These messages are then amplified in the 'politicized state media and the co-opted private media' (Levitsky and Way 2020) as well as in diaspora media sources that are tied to and funded by the regime. Gerrymandering and the manipulation of electoral rules to benefit the incumbent may also be applied to external voting, with pro-incumbent diaspora populations given easier voting access than those more likely to support the opposition. While hybrid regimes still conduct elections, this policy capture combined with limited access to independent media at home and abroad and differential external voting access can shut out opposition parties from competitive campaigning in key diaspora communities. For example, Turkey's AKP party has been the main recipient of external votes in European diaspora communities (Adamson 2019; Yabanci 2021), and Hungary's Fidesz received over 90 per cent of the votes from the Hungarian minority communities in neighbouring countries in the 2022 election (Waterbury 2025). Finally, the regime may try to control and manipulate 'diasporic civic spaces' by cutting funding or isolating and discrediting NGO leaders, then flooding the space left by them with regime-controlled or dependent NGOs (GONGOs) (Böcü and Panwar 2022; Şenay 2022; Yabanci 2021).

The second aspect is the establishment of ideological hegemony and the reframing of governing legitimacy by the hybrid regime. This is done through the use of populist, illiberal, and ethno-nationalist narratives, the dissemination of those narratives through regime-captured media, and the creation of 'regime-friendly publics' in the diaspora through programmes of political and ideological socialisation. Hybrid regimes may be characterised by 'populist diaspora engagement' that utilises a 'civilisationist discourse' to construct the idea of a homogenous people abroad as well as a polarising discourse that pits them against 'enemies abroad' (Böcü and Panwar 2022) and enemies within (Waterbury 2020b). In practice, transnational populism as diaspora engagement often seeks to construct an 'expansive' conception of a global diaspora through homogenising narratives and state institutions that encompass different types of diaspora communities within the same framework in an attempt to prevent 'intra-diasporic politics' from rising to the surface (Adamson 2019). Populist and illiberal regime narratives and disinformation are then exported into diaspora and minority-language media (Political Capital 2023), which over time can shift public opinion within the diaspora to align more with the external regime. The homogenous 'people abroad' must also be made into loyal subjects through projects of 'public pedagogy and political spectacle' (Şenay 2022), such as homeland educational and internship trips (Abramson 2017; Kantek, Veljanova and Onnudottir 2021; Molnár 2023), the creation of political, cultural, and social capacity-building projects within the diaspora, and performative and ritualised interactions between regime and diaspora actors (Şenay 2022). These ideological narratives also relate to the foreign policy interests of hybrid regimes. Hybrid regimes such as Hungary engage in 'populist argumentation' to justify its revisionist and often illiberal foreign policy goals, often targeting Brussels and West European states as enemies to state sovereignty while courting closer relations with Russia, China, and Turkey (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). These regimes may use expansionist diaspora engagement to stake a claim as a key player in a broader region, often tied to historical narratives of past greatness, such as Turkey's neo-Ottomanist vision (Adamson 2019; Şenay 2022), Hungary's neo-Carpathian narratives (Balogh 2021), and Russia's 'Russian World' concept (Laruelle 2015), or to civilisationist discourses around shared religious

traditions or commitments to anti-liberal and strongly statist political traditions (Böcü and Panwar 2022; Enyedi 2024). In this way, the regime can use its influence in the diaspora as a form of soft power to support its broader foreign policy goals.

The third aspect centres around the clientelism and patronage politics that drive funding and policy decisions by the regime. As a result, we see that diaspora policymaking in hybrid regimes may be characterised by high degrees of centralisation, top-down decision-making, and a lack of transparency surrounding who is making decisions about policy priorities and resource distribution. We are likely to see benefits and perks provided to political allies of the regimes within the diaspora, and the withholding of resources for those not closely allied with the regime incumbent (Şenay 2022; Yabanci 2021). As other scholars have shown, the promise of entitlements to incumbent 'clients' before an election and public threats related to losing those entitlements as the election nears, often framed as the punishment for letting the opposition gain ground, has been a key electoral strategy in Hungary's hybrid regime (Mares and Young 2018). This is also a pattern that we can see during campaigning for external votes (Waterbury 2025). Unlike fully authoritarian regimes, kin-state outreach and diaspora policy-making in hybrid regimes may also rely on the work of dedicated bureaucrats and researchers, who maintain some autonomy in shaping and implementing policies, as long as they do not criticise the incumbent regime too harshly or too publicly.

The election of the Fidesz-led government in 2010 in Hungary gave the party super-majoritarian powers, which the party and its leader, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, have used to erode liberal democratic checks on majoritarianism and ensure incumbent victory in every subsequent election. Since 2010, the packing of the constitutional court, the de facto limits on opposition media access, the manipulation of electoral rules to benefit the incumbent, the corrupt use of EU money to support political patronage networks, and the discursive, ideological, and institutional commitment to 'illiberalism' has shifted Hungary from a democratic to a non-democratic regime that still maintains some of the trappings of democracy (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; Enyedi 2024; Levitsky and Way 2020). The scholarly consensus is that Hungary is no longer a democracy, but not quite yet fully authoritarian or autocratic. Freedom House categorises Hungary as a Transitional or Hybrid regime[6] and V-Dem has considered Hungary to be an 'electoral autocracy' since 2019, with one of the 'steepest' democratic declines in the world in recent times (V-Dem Institute 2024). The Fidesz-led regime also combines discourses and strategies employing populist nationalism (Waterbury 2020b) or ethnopopulism (Jenne 2018), as well as illiberal populism (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018) and civilisationist discourses (Enyedi 2024). Connecting the changes in Hungary to the key transnational aspects of hybrid regimes outlined above, I argue that Hungary's diaspora engagement has come to be characterised by 'illiberal transnationalism', the exporting of illiberal regime practices and ideologies into diaspora communities through attempts to establish media, ideological, and political hegemony. This is accomplished through the dissemination of illiberal ideas through regime-captured media, the co-optation of diaspora actors via cross-border patronage networks, and the establishment of organisations and institutions at home and abroad that support regime-friendly socialisation. In the next section, I explore in more detail how this has played out in practice in Hungary's relationship with both its cross-border ethnic diaspora and parts of the wider global diaspora.

Hungary's Illiberal Transnationalism in the Cross-Border Diaspora Communities

The first aspect of Hungary's illiberal transnationalism that has played an increasingly large role in Hungary's cross-border ethnic communities in neighbouring Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine is control of Hungarian-language media by the Hungarian regime and its allied parties and organisations across the border. This is done through the buying up and funding of the diaspora media space, the suppression of independent Hungarian-language journalism, and the exporting of illiberal propaganda and disinformation into Hungarian minority communities through traditional and social media. Market acquisition of traditional media that requires significant and ongoing financial support, such as print and television, by regime-allied actors has led to the co-optation and transformation of formerly independent media outlets, which has further marginalised and pressured the remaining outlets for more critical and independent journalism (Political Capital 2023). It has also given editorial and financial control over major Hungarian language media sources in the diaspora communities to the minority political parties and organisations most loyal to the Hungarian regime. They then have the power to remove more independent-minded editors and journalists, to shape content to match that coming from Hungarian state media, and to amplify the regime's preferred messaging on a range of key issues, such as criticism of the EU and more pro-Russian positions on the war in Ukraine.

For example, in Serbia Hungarian institutions such as Hungarian-language television and newspaper are largely funded by a foundation that was created to distribute funds coming from the Hungarian state and which is controlled by VMSZ, a Hungarian party closely aligned with Fidesz. The Fidesz regime and its allies have used this power to remove independent leaders from the main television station and independent editors from the main Hungarian-language newspaper (*Magyar Szó*), and shut out opposition voices from the traditional media, forcing non-regime aligned actors to turn to internet portals and other less visible platforms (Gál 2020). In Slovakia, critical voices within the diaspora have described a 'coup' in Hungarian-language media (Political Capital 2023), with those supporting the Fidesz-aligned parties taking up more and more room in the media space, and Hungarian-language television dominated by Hungarian state-controlled stations (Czímer 2023). In Romania, ownership of Hungarian-language media has become consolidated in the hands both a regime conglomerate and one controlled by the regime-allied minority party, RMDSZ (Political Capital 2023). In addition, Hungarian government subsidies to the RMDSZ-controlled media association have increased since 2021, allowing them to construct an 'alternative world' supporting Hungary's illiberal messaging (Vig and Babos 2022). Fidesz MEPs have also used diaspora visits to criticise critical journalists, even calling them out and threatening them by name, as happened in the run up to the 2022 Hungarian state elections (Vig 2022a).

The conglomeration and homogenisation of Hungarian language media spaces in the diaspora communities matters not only because it suppresses and silences alternate voices, but also because of the illiberal messages and disinformation it allows to be transmitted. The ideological vision coming from Budapest includes a 'sovereigntist' conception of nationalism and legitimacy that favours alliances with Russia and China and pits Hungary and its ideological allies against Brussels/EU and the West, with particular disdain for liberal protections against sexual orientation and gender-based discrimination, the international obligations of asylum processing and refugee protection, and the role of NATO and the United States in 'pushing' Russia to war in Ukraine and not forcing Ukraine to the negotiating table (Kerényi 2024; Székely 2023; Vig 2022b; Vig and Babos 2022). Fidesz's rhetoric also creates an alternate conception of minority protections, one in which only a strong, sovereigntist, unabashedly statist regime can protect the broader nation and its diasporas abroad; where the liberal ideals of human rights protections and supranational rights frameworks within the EU have failed to protect the collective

rights of deserving cultural minorities, those representing 'traditional', Christian, and fundamentally 'European' cultural groups (Kerényi 2024; Kertész 2022; Kiss and Toró 2023; Vig and Babos 2022).

These transnationalised illiberal messages and the broad influence they are having in shifting public opinion in the diaspora communities present numerous dilemmas for political actors in the ethnic diaspora communities. Hungarian researchers in Romania have described the situation as follows: 'Fidesz's campaign machine has seeped into Transylvania, shaping Transylvanian Hungarian public opinion in its own image on issues such as relations with the EU, migration, or the Russian-Ukrainian war. Research has shown that Hungarians in Transylvania are moving further and further away from the Romanian social consensus and are aligning themselves with Fidesz propaganda' (Kiss and Toró 2023). This public opinion research has found more vaccine scepticism, more pro-Russia views, more anti-immigrant views, and less support for Ukraine among the Hungarian minorities than most Romanians, all findings that mirror propaganda transmitted from the Hungarian regime (Kerényi 2024; Lengyel 2023). This in turn has complicated the position of some minority political representatives, particularly those in Romania and Ukraine, who still need to bargain with majority political actors. They have had to walk a line of trying not to alienate the more liberal majority, while at the same time not straying too far from the increasingly illiberal views of their own constituents, a process some have referred to as 'double speak' (Kiss and Toró 2023).

Further deepening these difficult dynamics for minority political parties, the second aspect of Hungary's illiberal transnationalism s is the cross-border co-optation of diaspora actors through Hungary's 'support policy'. The dramatic increases in cross-border funding by the Hungarian regime through processes lacking in transparency and dialogue with stakeholders has worsened clientelism and increased the dependence of minority political actors and institutions on the regime. Internal critics of these dynamics argue that Fidesz and its non-democratic practices have been able to establish a significant degree of hegemony and control over the minority political elite, first, through financial support conditional on political loyalty. Key minority elites engaged in 'loyalty competition' for resources coming from Hungary and entered into a dependency relationship with the regime based on continued access to patronage (Gál 2020; Kiss and Toró 2023; Nagy 2022; Vig 2023; Vig and Babos 2022). Fidesz has also funded and constructed political and cultural institutions in the diaspora that are socialising a new generation of minority elites and non-elites within Fidesz's world views, creating another layer of dependency that extends to the everyday lives of those in the minority. The Fidesz regime has funded sports teams and constructed training facilities across the border (Pavalasc 2022); renovated historic buildings (Vig and Babos 2022); elevated the status of rural elites (Nagy 2022); and created political training academies and networks, such as the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, as a way to disseminate regime-friendly ideas across the border and across time to the upcoming generation of diaspora leaders (Kiss and Toró 2023).

This dependency and co-optation undermine the political agency of the ethnic diaspora communities, as they have become more passive actors in a process of 'diasporaisation' through which they are being governed by Budapest, rather than being supported in their own identity- and community-building projects. As one analyst described the situation facing the Hungarians in Romania: 'Under pressure from Hungary's ruling party, it [RMDSZ] gradually abandoned its own goals and became a weightless, marginal player in national political strategy. The future of Hungarians in Transylvania is now determined by Budapest, which may further deepen the identity crisis and collective sense of failure of the RMDSZ' (Levente Salat, quoted in Vig 2024). In addition, as some critics have argued, Hungary is increasingly 'subsuming' the interests of the ethnic diaspora communities to Fidesz's geopolitical ambitions and 'geopolitical sovereignty building' (Kerényi 2024; Nagy 2022). For example, Hungary did

not lodge complaints against Slovakia's new law that forces NGOs to register as 'foreign-funded organisations', even though this law could create additional burdens for Hungarian groups there, because Hungary's controversial 'Sovereignty Protection Office' does the same.[7] At the same time, Hungary has resisted Ukraine's attempts to move towards EU membership, arguing that the hesitancy is about Ukraine's treatment of its Hungarian minority, while members of the Hungarian community there have asked Hungary to support Ukraine's accession (Loustau 2025). The irony, though, is that more Hungarian Ukrainians have fled to Hungary since the beginning of the way, and the community there has shrunk considerably.

Hungary's Illiberal Transnationalism in the Wider Global Diaspora

Moving to Hungary's approach to its wider global diaspora, particularly communities in North America and incipient diasporans in Western Europe, we see some similar patterns, but also some key differences. Institutionally, Hungary's global diaspora outreach is characterised by the proliferation of programmes and conduits of funding, many of which appear to compete or provide parallel services, reflecting clientelistic networks and a lack of transparency about how and why new programmes and institutions are created (see Nowak and Nowosielski 2021 on Poland). At the same time, global diaspora policy and the approach to recent emigrants is subsumed and deprioritised in relation to Hungary's kin-state commitments (Waterbury 2018) and in relation to the Fidesz regime's existing ideological priorities, such as 'family friendly' pro-natalism, demographic nationalism, and the construction of a global network of regime defenders. Hungary's broader diaspora engagement also relies on political patronage networks to determine who gets funding, who shapes policies, and who speaks for diaspora communities. Access to programmes and funding of diaspora programmes is heavily weighted to those with proven membership in a core set of politically loyal and culturally conservative institutions, such as church-related groups and the Hungarian Scouts. Hungary's diaspora engagement also privileges symbolic belonging and cultural identity performance through programmes that construct a unified sense of Hungarian identity in line with Fidesz discourse and priorities. However, the regime lacks the kind of direct pathways to diffuse its illiberal ideas that it uses for the cross-border ethnic diasporas, so the levels of regime dependency and co-optation in the migrant diaspora communities of North American and Western Europe are much more limited.

To understand the compromised institutional position of Hungary's broader diaspora engagement, I first highlight the existence of two research and policy institutes funded by the Hungarian government that deal with external national communities, the NPKI (*Nemzetpolitikai Kutató Intézet* – Research Institution for Hungarians Abroad[8]) and the NSKI (*Nemzetstratégiai Kutaóintézet* – Research Institute for National Strategy). Both are clearly institutionally grounded in cross-border kin-state outreach, research, and policy but have taken mandates to address wider diaspora research and policy as well. There are also unclear institutional and policy territory boundaries between two, raising questions about why the NSKI, which answers to the Deputy Prime Minister's Office, was created and funded while the NPKI, which is under the auspices of the State Secretariat for National Policy, had already been established. The vice-director of the NSKI explained to me that the NPKI has a more public political role, while the NSKI does more practical, 'scientific' research.[9] However, questions remain as to why Jenő Szász, a former Hungarian Romanian politician close to Fidesz, was given his own institute. NPKI also seems to have a larger diaspora politics and policy portfolio than NSKI, though the latter has done some research among the West European diaspora communities, including among members of the more recent emigrants in the UK. In another example, while there are some programmes specific to the needs

of Hungarian communities in Western Europe, such as the funding of Hungarian-language weekend schools, recent emigrant communities continue to be marginalised by the regime because they are seen as less likely to vote for Fidesz (Waterbury 2025; Kovács 2020). It is notable that Hungary only recently created a 'Homecoming portal' for diaspora members in November 2023, which now exists as a website 'created to support and provide information to those returning to Hungary'[10] after years of failed return programmes and promises to create an 'emigration and diaspora center' that never materialised (Semjén 2019).

Another interesting example is Kopp Institute for Demography and Families (KINCS), a research institute created in 2018 to support the Fidesz government's emphasis on 'family policy' that has also entered the diaspora policy realm by making existing pro-natalist benefits accessible to diaspora Hungarians. According to Balázs Molnár, the VP for Strategy and Coordination for KINCS, they had made it easier for emigrant Hungarians to access pro-natalist benefits such as the Baby Waiting (*Baby Varó*) loan programme as way to incentivise return, and had created the 'Umbilical Cord Programme', which gives minor one-time payments and a baby bond to families that have Hungarian babies outside the borders of the state.[11] KINCS includes both global diaspora and kin-minority communities in its portfolio but offers primarily symbolic benefits, targets a very specific type of Hungarian in the diaspora, and is based on a key component of the Fidesz government's programme and brand of conservative ideology that has become part of its domestic and global brand (Fodor 2022). The Umbilical Cord Programme and the presentation of a 'Baby Box' of supplies to families with new babies, for example, are both highly touted as symbols of 'recognition and assistance' to Hungarian families on both sides of border and the value to the nation of those babies, though the actual value of that assistance is fairly nominal. More significant family policy benefits are only accessible for those who pay into the Hungarian state employment system, but importantly this is not tied specifically to long-term residence in Hungary. This aspect, then, is supposed to appeal to Hungarian emigrants working and living in Western Europe, who would have additional economic incentives to finish up their adventure abroad and come home in order to start building a large family, buy a house, and settle down.[12] The existing pro-natalist framework substitutes for a more robust and diverse programme that would engage emigrants as flexible 'citizens of the market' (Paul 2014).

An example of the institutional complexity and political patronage seeping into Hungary's diaspora engagement programmes is the overlap between different organisations that offer scholarship and birthright programmes to Hungarians from the diaspora, and also that send Hungarians into the diaspora to help teach language and culture and preserve diaspora archives. While the cross-pollination between different parts of the global Hungarian nation seems admirable, there appears to be some tension between the support for programmes created specifically to target diaspora engagement (e.g. ReConnect Hungary), and those created primarily for connections between Hungary and the Carpathian Basin that have now extended into the diaspora (e.g. *Rákóczi Szövetség*/Rákóczi Association). ReConnect Hungary is a type of birthright programme that is administered by the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation (HHRF), a US-based diaspora advocacy organisation, but relies on Hungarian government money as well as private donations to help subsidise trips for young adults (18+) of Hungarian background. The Rákóczi Association functioned primarily to run camps that would bring together youth from Hungary and the Hungarian minority communities in the neighbouring countries, to foster connections and understanding. However, the Association then started a Diaspora Programme in 2018, which brought younger diaspora members to Hungary to experience the camps with other Hungarian youth from the region. In addition, the Balassi Institute, in addition to its work supporting weekend schools and Hungarian language pedagogy in diaspora communities (Papp, Kovács and Kováts 2020),

runs a Hungarian Culture and Language Studies programme that targets future diaspora leaders as a form of 'soft power' (Kantek *et al.* 2021). Finally, there are programmes like the Kőrösi Csoma Sándor programme, which sends Hungarians to assist diaspora organisations, and the Hungary Foundation's Visiting Research Fellowship for Hungarians to gain experience at US research institute and think tanks.

On one hand, we can see that these different programme target different populations, with ReConnect focusing on engaging young adults that may want to learn more about their Hungarian background in the hopes they become more committed diaspora members (Abramson 2017; Molnár 2023), the Rákóczi Association targeting diaspora children with some level of Hungarian language knowledge to improve and reinforce their Hungarian cultural belonging, and the Balassi Institute targeting committed diasporans involved in Hungarian linguistic and cultural organisations to shape them into future diaspora leaders who will 'safeguard' Hungarian national identity (Kantek *et al.* 2021). In practice, however, we can see that these various programmes are often competing for the same piles of funding and institutional support. For example, the Rákóczi Association Diaspora Programme brought 1,000 diaspora members to Hungary in 2019, while ReConnect Hungary only was able to fund 20–30 for its programme per year, reflecting both different levels of funding and institutional support, issues that might have been resolved through coordination and more bottom-up initiatives by diaspora organisations.[13] There have also been tensions around the process for deciding who gets slots for the Balassi programme in Hungary, as well as for the Kőrösi Csoma Sándor programme and Hungary Foundation fellowships in the US, with some working in the diaspora critical of the political patronage networks that seem to drive these decisions.[14] The Hungary Foundation also now offers scholarships to live and study in Budapest to carefully selected Western scholars, most of whom are generally conservative and appear empathetic to the regime and its perspective.[15] This is another form of using mobility and exchange programmes as a way of legitimising the Hungarian regime and creating a global network of defenders.

Conclusion

This article has explored in depth the interaction between changes in Hungary's political regime since 2010, the state's approach to engaging cross-border Hungarian minority communities and the wider global Hungarian diaspora, and the potential impacts on those external communities that maintain ties to Hungary. While discursively Hungary has deployed a more inclusive global nation framework, under conditions of democratic backsliding and the consolidation of a hybrid regime the incorporation of more types of external communities into the state's transnational outreach has created the conditions for fine-grained targeting and marginalisation not only *between* different diasporas but *within* those diasporas. More importantly, the development of Hungary into a hybrid regime has brought with it the expansion of transnational networks, programmes, and practices that attempt to export aspects of its illiberal domestic and foreign policy goals into the cross-border minority communities as well as the wider global diaspora.

Taking these developments seriously, this article offers an analysis of how we should think about diaspora engagement under conditions of decreasing democratic competition. I argue that hybrid regimes are likely to be characterised by a set of specific transnational practices, including co-opting and controlling political and social organisations in the diaspora through curtailing opposition access and expanding patronage networks; establishing ideological hegemony in the diaspora through media and political socialisation; and encompassing the diaspora into the regime's populist, illiberal, and nationalist ideologies and geopolitical goals. I then outlined the specific character of these practices in the Hungarian hybrid regime, which has been characterised by 'illiberal transnationalism'. Finally, I highlighted

some of the ways in which these practices have been transmitted into the Hungarian minority communities in Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine, and how they have impacted Hungary's broader diaspora engagement. While the longer term impact of these developments remains to be seen, over time this form of transnational engagement may result in what Rovny (2024) calls 'illiberal cross-pressures' on democratic stability and majority-minority bargaining in the neighbouring countries. While this is a far less likely outcome in the wider diaspora communities, we could imagine that the political 'ownership' of external engagement policies by one party over time could lead to other detrimental outcomes, such as entrenched clientelism, mistrust of the homeland state government, and more significant politicisation of diaspora cultural programmes.

Notes

1. I define a kin-state as 'a state that represents the majority nation of a transborder ethnic group whose members reside in neighbouring territories' (Waterbury 2020a: 799). Kin-state engagement refers to the set of transnational policies that a state uses to protect and promote members of that trans- or cross-border ethnic group, which can also be considered a type of 'accidental' diaspora (Brubaker 2000).
2. The conference was organised by the Ferenc Mádl Institute of Comparative Law and the Research Institute for Hungarian Communities Abroad, with the support of the Gábor Bethlen Fund (the main conduit for kin-state and now diaspora policy funding and programming). https://mfi.gov.hu/en/events/diaspora-policies-in-the-21st-century-new-answers-for-new-challenges/
3. Balázs Molnár, KINCS (Kopp Institute for Demography and Families) at the Diaspora Policies conference. This is also a play on words as 'kincs' in Hungarian means 'treasure'.
4. See statements by Zsolt Szekeres, the president of the Hungarian Human Rights Federation and founding member of the Hungarian American Coalition, during the Q&A portion of 'Diaspora Policies in the 21st Century: New Answers for New Challenges', March 28, 2022. https://mfi.gov.hu/en/events/diaspora-policies-in-the-21st-century-new-answers-for-new-challenges/
5. This research was conducted while I was a US Fulbright Scholar generously hosted by the Institute for Minority Studies, Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary. I also analysed debates and discussions from more independent Hungarian-language media over the last four years, primarily from online media sources that are willing to publish interviews with critical scholars and investigative journalists.
6. https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/nations-transit/2024
7. Henry Barrett, The Sovereign Protection Office as the Tip of the Iceberg, *Verfassungsblog* (March 15, 2024): https://verfassungsblog.de/tip-of-the-iceberg/
8. Though a more accurate English translation would be Research Institution for 'National' Policy, reflecting its pedigree as the reincarnation of earlier research institutes focused primarily on Carpathian Basin Hungarians.
9. Márton Péti, interview with author, April 25, 2022.
10. https://hazavaro.gov.hu/. See report of announcement of programme to Diaspora Council here: https://hungarytoday.hu/government-welcomes-back-hungarians-from-diaspora/
11. Interview with author, April 19, 2022.
12. B. Molnár, interview with author.
13. Conversation with Zsolt Szekeres of HHRF (April 13, 2022), and Balázs Tárnok (April 21, 2022), who has worked with the Rákóczi Association.

14. Anonymous interview with member of Hungarian diaspora organisation based in the United States (April 13, 2022).
15. See the list of current and past fellows here: https://www.hungaryfoundation.org/budapest-fellowship-program/

Funding

This research was funded in part by the US Fulbright Scholar Programme.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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How to cite this article: Waterbury M. (2025). Hybrid Regimes and Transnational Practices: The Illiberal Turn in Hungary's Post-2010 Kin-State and Diaspora Engagement. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 14(2): 55–70.