Every book has a story. For instance, Edward Gibbon accounts for the pivotal moment of conceiving his world-famous *Decline and fall* as follows: ‘It was at Rome, on the 15th of October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed fryars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind’ (Gibbon 1869, p. 79). The idea of writing *this* book has developed slowly and silently over a decade as its author sat musing amidst the ruins of what had been once called the Third Hungarian Republic, while the supporters of the regime were singing the praise of their populist authoritarian leader, his ‘revolution in the ballot-boxes’, his newly established ‘system of national cooperation’, and the construction of an ‘illiberal state’, or, in a lower key, a ‘Christian Democratic state’. They were singing his praise in front of the majestic nineteenth-century neo-Renaissance building of the Parliament, in the public media outlets controlled by political appointees, in the countless newspapers owned by the allies of the regime, on vast billboards along the highways, on websites, in the Facebook groups of the fans of the prime minister, and many other venues on many other occasions. In the meantime, the regime’s puzzled opposition heatedly, ineffectively, and largely self-destructively debated what went wrong, whom to blame, and how to move forward.

At the beginning of this long decade, I considered myself something of a historian of political thought, interested chiefly in how to do things with words, and had a twofold research focus on eighteenth-century political thought and the period of the post-communist transition. It would have been an obvious choice for me to try to write the decline and fall of the Third Republic as a historian of political thought. But I did not feel the buzz for it. Living in and studying a post-truth world made me realize that it is much less intellectually fruitful to ask how to do things with words than to ask how to do things with things. Thereby the motivation for merely understanding democratic decline ceded its place to a desire to judge it and
react to it. So far, so good, but I still did not know how to proceed and in which direction.

The decisive impetus to turn to normative political theory came from multiple sources. In the middle of the 2010s, I had the opportunity to hold a series of university courses at Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary, about classics from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Tacitus to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hume, and Weber (not entirely new terrain for a historian of political thought). I also held a course about political realism in literature and popular culture from Antigone to Game of Thrones. I owe a great deal of gratitude to the participants of these courses at Eötvös Loránd University for the stimulating conversations and their enthusiasm for these topics. Meanwhile, I began to study political theory systematically, and I soon realized that it is realist political theory that I find most relevant to the issues I am most passionately interested in. Through the works of Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss, Mark Philp, Andrew Sabl, Matt Sleat, Enzo Rossi, and Alison McQueen – to mention just the most important inspirations for my academic transformation – I learned a new language and a new perceptivity for the complicated relationship between ethical and political problems. Gradually, I started to have an understanding of the stakes of contemporary debates about realism. I also learned to appreciate the critics of political realism and found my place on the liberal side of the realist current. I consider it my exceptional fortune that during the last few years, I got acquainted with many other political theorists like Allyn Fives, Edward Hall, Gulsen Seven, Janosch Prinz, Paul Raekstad, Uğur Aytaç, Ben Cross, Carlo Burelli, Ilaria Cozzaglio, and Thomas Fossen.

For me, the next huge step forward was the establishment of a realist research group at the Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest. I owe special gratitude to the members of this group: Attila Gyulai, Zoltán Balázs, Tibor Mándi, Gábor Illés, Milán Pap, Anna Ujlaki, Annamária Csornyay, Dávid Csepregi, Marcell Sasvári, Ádám Darabos, and Szilárd Tóth. Our weekly reading seminars opened a fast lane for us to become familiar with the state of the art of political theory, and our intensive collaboration inspired writing articles and more than one doctoral dissertation in the last few years. However, we soon realized that reading recently published papers is not enough to get in sync with what was going on in realism because what was published freshly was the state of the art of the workshops held two or three years before. To make up for this shortcoming, we started to organize conferences and seminars, edited books, and tried to put Budapest onto the map of realist political theory. Among the friends and colleagues participating in this group, three people stand out: Attila, Gábor, and Anna, with whom I had the most inspiring conversations about realism.
My first attempt to present my ideas about realism in front of an international audience took place at a multidisciplinary workshop on utopias at the Central European University in Budapest (alas, CEU was ousted from the country by the illiberal government of Hungary some years later). My original paper was overcrowded with ideas and messed up a little by my earlier interest in how things can be done with words. It was about the epistemology of political realism and made a baffling analogy between fiction and political realism. It is no surprise after all that a much more polished version eventually got published in the collection of essays based on the Budapest workshop. I am especially grateful to the main organizer of the event and the editor of the book, Zsolt Czigányik, for his great help in making my ideas more transparent even to myself. Other parts of my argument later found their way into publication through long and winding roads. A paper about the ‘a-theoretical core of political realism’, a distant descendant of this early paper, was later published in Studies in Social and Political Thought.

Quickly, it became evident to me that this was not exactly what I really want to do, and therefore I started to work on the project that eventually resulted in this book. Over the years, I gave multiple talks and presentations about the core idea of the project (at a seminar at the incredible Political Science Department of Central European University, a workshop at Princeton University, another seminar at Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin, a Mancept workshop, a seminar at Aarhus University, and an APSA Annual Meeting). During this time, while keeping one eye constantly on the book project, I wrote multiple essays that sought to explore largely uncharted territories for political realism and seemed especially relevant to the book’s main theoretical concerns. One paper, published in the European Journal of Political Theory, argued, for example, that realism could profit from a neo-Aristotelian regime theory that dispenses with what I then described as a ‘moralistic bias’. Another paper, published in Res Publica, laid the groundwork for a realist theory of political obligations and examined its implications for non-democratic contexts. Yet another paper in Critical Review of Social and Political Philosophy defended a realist understanding of political obligation against philosophical anarchism. (Since then, the theory of political obligations became a kind of obsession for me. There is more than one manuscript of mine about political obligations under review in various journals.) The fourth paper about Tacitus and his realist understanding of the problem of political failure (a late fruit of my courses held at Eötvös Loránd University) came out in The European Legacy. Not all of what I said in these papers found its way into this book, but this is not astonishing, after all. These papers were essential milestones along the path toward this book, but it is the fate of milestones – even the important ones – to stay where they
have stood while the travelers pass them and move forward toward their proper destinations.

Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude for the patience, open-mindedness, and cheerfulness to all those people at Manchester University Press whom I had the honor to collaborate with during the last some years. It was a long journey – longer than any of us had expected. But now, here we are.