

# Xenophobia and Power Politics: The Hungarian Far Right

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In this chapter we aim to demonstrate how the Orbán regime occupied the far-right ideological space in Hungary. What did the leaders of the regime do to fundamentally reshape ideology and cultural politics? Between 2010 and 2019, dominant ideology, state propaganda, and cultural politics of the increasingly authoritarian regime, became indistinguishable from each other. Is it possible to have an increasingly flourishing autocratic regime in the European Union? Member states of the European Union are supposed to be liberal democracies, but Hungary, in harbouring authoritarian features under a disintegrating guise of democracy, is rightly called a competitive authoritarian regime. As such, it is the first non-democratic member state in the history of the European Union.

Hybrid regimes have the common feature that they all have competition, although the political elite in power deliberately rearranges state regulations and the political arena as to grant itself undue advantages. (Levitsky/Way 2010) For all practical purposes, they are all beneficiaries of an uneven playing field. Orbán's Hungary fits into this model. There is a point where even broken democracy comes to an end. At a point where the line between private and public interest is swallowed up, the difference between nationalization and privatization disappears, where public interest becomes indistinguishable from the interests of politicians/economic players capturing the state, where *mutatis mutandis*, the system ends up defending these entrepreneurs. Corruption became centralized, legalized and systemic. »What is called corruption is in effect Fidesz's most important political aim,« the regime's chief ideologist stated with undisguised honesty (Lánczi 2015, translation by the authors). Corruption in Hungary is no longer seen as deviant behaviour, but as an integral part of the system itself. Breaking the law has become the new normal. What was once described as the abuse of power, today has become a defining feature of the regime. The emerging clan state, or »mafia state is a privatized form of the parasitic state« (Magyar 2016:13), where the patron-client relationship no longer refers to the patronage system also seen in democracies; essentially, it is the replacement of individual and institutional autonomies by the system of dependencies. This comes close to a definition of authoritarian regimes.

In 2016, when Hungarian citizens were prevented from submitting a referendum question by brute »civilian« force (i.e. skinheads and football hooligans) and with the government's tacit consent, they were barred from exercising their constitutional right. With its outsourced violence the Orbán regime took another step on the road towards establishing a power monopoly. Just as the far right Jobbik party once had a paramilitary wing, there were indications that a similar team of loosely organized thugs in Fidesz colours was about to emerge whose members, while not wearing uniforms, were deployed to intimidate demonstrators and members of the opposition.

For policy reasons the regime proudly claimed that its enforcement agencies did not use direct force. The job of intimidation has been outsourced to »civilian« street fighters, the ultras of some football clubs and others. This policy perfectly fits the Orbán regime's governance strategy characterized by a deliberate effort to blur the differences between official and unofficial, responsible and unaccountable agents. Decisions are made outside the established institutions, behind their back, in an invisible and grey zone, in a world of shady organizations bearing no political responsibility or liability. Under this scheme, acts of violence that may embarrass those in power are performed by skilled skinheads that, in turn, can be easily disclaimed by Fidesz. Similarly, the budget is not necessarily drafted by the minister in charge, but by private firms with no legal ties to the government, and whose members may also have access to classified information.

We consider the centralization and personalization of power, the nationalist propaganda coupled with the discrimination and marginalization of underclass elements of the society, the forced change of elites by the predatory (or mafia) state, and the practice of power politics as the building blocks of the regime. The regime is rooted in the prime minister's conviction that »revolutionary circumstances« mandate him to execute exceptional policies (Bozóki 2011, 2015).

In Hungary, nationalism has been of particular salience and emotional appeal, harnessing and playing off of many Hungarians' discontent with the post-transition situation. Indeed, the cultivation of a strong nationalist discourse has been a key boon for the Orbán regime, which has manipulated Hungarians' disillusionment, prejudices, and fears in a way that has rendered the citizenry increasingly susceptible to extreme nationalist and right-wing ideologies. In the midst of widespread dissatisfaction with Hungary's direction in the aftermath of the Soviet communist hegemony, nationalist sentiment is particularly salient in that it gives citizens a common identity and sense of belonging within what would otherwise appear to be an alien land stripped of its rightful territory. Indeed, the power of nationalism and nationalizing discourses, has arguably been the driving force behind the far right and its popularity among its constituents (Brubaker 1996).

The right's nationalizing discourse has attempted to create and reinforce the perception of a common national identity among Hungarians that stretches back

to ancient times. The other far-right party, Jobbik, has capitalized on the idea of a founding myth to bind together Hungarians with a sense of national pride and belonging. The Jobbik cultural policy platform included a call for constitutional protection of Hungarian »national symbols« such as the Holy Crown and the Turul bird, further solidifying this conception of an ancient nation with a common founding myth (ibid). In constructing such a national identity, Jobbik and Fidesz have promoted a homogeneous nation of ethnic Hungarians at the expense of ethnic minorities, and the parties' vision of an ideal Hungary values these »true« Hungarians above all others – even if not explicitly.

Earlier, Viktor Orbán attempted to distance himself from charges of extremism leveled against his political allies in Jobbik, though he has drawn ire on a number of occasions for adopting a similarly exclusionary stance. In 2013, he was accused of trying to gain favor among far-right radicals by bestowing a high honor, the Táncsics Prize, upon some figures known for their espousal of anti-Semitic conspiracies and extreme nationalist views (Hungary Hands Awards 2015). Thus, Orbán has recognized the power of national symbols and radical nationalist myths in mobilizing popular support and consolidating power, prompting the regime to pick up on Jobbik's cues and repackage them so as to appear the originators of these ethnic nationalist ideals.

The refugee crisis of 2015 has provided a particularly powerful source for cultivating ethnic nationalist sentiment. The crisis sweeping across Europe has been met by a variety of responses – ranging from hospitable to downright hostile – from nations affected by the influx of desperate Syrian refugees. The hostile response of the Hungarian government was, in large part, a product of Fidesz's attempts to appropriate Jobbik's stance on the crisis and what should be done to mitigate it. The result of this political outbidding has been the development of a nationalist climate that aids Hungary's authoritarian backsliding.

Underlying the Fidesz-Jobbik convergence on the refugee crisis was a very particular conception of »Hungarian-ness« that has been largely influenced by Jobbik's unabashedly exclusionary version of Hungarian ethnic nationalism. A cornerstone of its ideological foundation was an intense wariness toward »multiculturalism«. In a post on the party's official website, a Jobbik operative discussed the need to counter the wave of migrants crossing through Hungary, at the same time underscoring this exhortation with a condemnation of the principles of multiculturalism: »The failure of multiculturalism is obvious for everybody and even if the West is already lost, nobody can deprive Central Europe of its right to preserve the continent together with its traditional values, religion, and culture« (Editorial 2015a). Transparent through this condemnation of multiculturalism is a very particular conception of the ideal culture that needs defending. The far-right, Orbán government intimation that the West is beyond saving projects an image of Hungary as the guardians of Europe from individuals that they see as Muslim invaders, undesir-

ables who pose a dire threat to a homogeneous, Christian Hungary (Ádám/Bozóki 2016a).

In the case of immigration, it became clear that the so-called moderating effects of power have not done anything to constrain Orbán and his Fidesz party in promoting their stances towards the refugee crisis. Indeed, Fidesz's immigration policy very closely resembled the immigration policy started by Jobbik. Orbán has asserted that Hungary is not sufficiently equipped to handle migrants because of the country's inexperience with ›multiculturalism‹ (Tremlett/Messing 2015). In addition to the construction of a 110-mile-long fence along the Hungarian-Serbian border to keep out migrants in transit and Fidesz's fierce rejection of EU-imposed migrant quotas, the Orbán government channeled xenophobic attitudes toward the crisis and set in motion a nationwide anti-immigration campaign that included posters and billboards throughout Hungary admonishing migrants and reminding them that Hungary is a nation for Hungarians. Among the poster quotes were the following: »If you come to Hungary you have to respect our culture.« and »If you come to Hungary you have to respect our laws.<sup>1</sup> This marked a clear political ploy by Fidesz to ingratiate itself to voters who felt threatened by migrants entering the country, especially given that the migrants toward which the signs were purportedly directed were unlikely to understand Hungarian.

An additional aspect of Fidesz's grassroots anti-migrant campaign, called the »National Consultation on Immigration,« was a questionnaire sent in July 2015 to every Hungarian household in a supposed effort to collect data on Hungarians' feelings on immigration. Clearly imbued with an anti-immigrant slant, the survey asked such leading questions as: »There are some who think that mismanagement of the immigration question by Brussels may have something to do with increased terrorism. Do you agree with this view?« (National Consultation 2015, Transl. by the authors). Such aggressive posturing has been complemented by Orbán's refusal to abide by mandatory EU quotas imposed on each member state to more evenly spread the financial and infrastructural burden. Additionally, the Orbán regime decided to unilaterally reject transfers of migrants to Hungary under the Dublin Regulations (Lyons 2015).

However, Orbán was just using the opportunity of the migration crisis for the purposes of manipulation: to control Hungarian citizens more strictly in order to cement his own power. The political right's hostility towards refugees has been complemented and preceded by a long history of its hostility towards certain sub-groups of Hungarians as well, namely the Roma and Jews. This hostility has only worsened since the rise of the right wing and Fidesz's effective attempts to out-bid Jobbik in its xenophobic zeal. László Trócsányi, Hungary's Minister of Justice

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-07-08/hungarians-use-wit-paint-and-little-photoshop-deface-anti-immigration-billboards> (access date: 7.9.2020)

(2014-2019) was lambasted by the Hungarian and international press for a statement in May 2015 wherein he both criticized the EU migrant quota system and gave an interesting justification as to why Hungary cannot accept Syrian refugees: because Hungary must first focus on integrating the country's Roma population of 800.000 (Adam 2015). Indeed, analysts have pointed out how Fidesz's scapegoating of the Roma is strikingly reminiscent of Jobbik, warily stating that tying the immigration issue with the Roma is a »genius« tactic by Fidesz to win over the growing contingent of Jobbik supporters within Hungary (Tremlett/Messing 2015).

Fidesz's Roma-blaming tactics echo Jobbik's previous cries of rampant »gypsy crime« (*cigánybűnözés* in Hungarian) an offensive term that has become more widely used and accepted since the Hungarian mainstream has shifted to the right. The government officially denies that it is racist against the Roma people while also justifying their usage of the term. At the same time as the regime officially asserts that it is not anti-Roma, it categorically equates the minority ethnic group with »the predominant commission of certain types of crimes« (Editorial 2015b, Transl. by the authors). What is more, they support their claim by citing cases of increased crime rates in communities abroad that have seen large influxes of Roma migrants, saying that »when such Roma populations emigrate [...] the communities they come to suddenly find themselves victims of precisely these forms of criminality« (ibid., Transl. by. the authors).

This anti-Roma rhetoric has been taken a step further with the formation of far-right paramilitary groups. In 2007, former Jobbik leader Gábor Vona founded the *Magyar Gárda*, (»Hungarian Guard«), with its primary goal being to »strengthen national self-defense and to maintain public order« (Alapító Nyilatkozat 2007, Transl. by the authors). The group's members wore fascist-era boots and coats adorned with the red-and-white-striped flag used by the anti-Semitic, fascist Arrow Cross Party in the 1940s. Though Hungarian courts ordered the disbandment of the *Magyar Gárda* in 2008, the group utilized legal loopholes to reorganize into three separate but associated groups: the New Hungarian Guard, the Hungarian National Guard, and the Civil Guard Association for a Better Hungarian Future (Murer 2015: 88). The descendants of the original Hungarian Guard wear similar fascist-era uniforms and employ intimidation tactics that sometimes spark outright violence. In March of 2011, these paramilitary groups went to Gyöngyöspata, a village, to carry out »military exercises« and »security patrols,« also setting up a training center in a part of town heavily populated by Roma. The paramilitary presence there prompted the evacuation of some 270 Roma women and children, while the radical Hungarian National Front declared on its website that the conflagrations between the radicals and the Roma people marked the possibility of a civil war.

Not only has Fidesz neglected to unequivocally condemn these racist paramilitary groups, but it has also pushed policies aimed at intimidating and marginalizing ethnic minorities. The industrial city of Miskolc, for example, is a large city

with a significant Roma population, within which there is a disproportionate unemployment rate; as a result, dilapidated Roma encampments take up the hillsides. In an effort to outbid Jobbik's approaches to the hot-button Roma question during the 2014 elections, Fidesz circulated a petition demanding the destruction of the Roma encampments in Miskolc and then later passed a measure authorizing payments to Roma families in exchange for their agreeing to move out of an encampment in a favoured area of the city (Traub 2015: 6). Though the Constitutional Court declared the bill unconstitutional, it is a demonstration of Fidesz's employment of controversial tactics to expand its voter base among right-wing populists and to consolidate its power in a fractious Hungary. To be sure, Fidesz has taken note of Jobbik's focus on exclusionary nationalism and appropriated it for the sake of its own political gain.

An additionally important example of Fidesz appropriating policies and stances originating with Jobbik was the assertion that Hungary was a fundamentally Christian state. For the Jobbik party, national identity and Christianity are inseparable concepts. One of the primary policy areas of Jobbik's platform was »clerical« by which they meant to preserve and promote churches, thereby increasing the role of religion in everyday affairs. Similarly, Fidesz has promoted Christianity as a core element in and of the Hungarian state, and his stated commitment to protecting Hungary as a »Christian nation« has become a rallying cry in his approach to the refugee crisis. The new constitution ratified by Orbán includes an explicit designation of Hungary as a Christian nation: »We recognize the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood« (Krekó/Mayer 2015: 199). Also enshrined in the constitution is a reference to the radical-right symbol of the Holy Crown as the »embodiment of [...] the unity of the nation« (ibid). It is important to note that Orbán controversially pushed through this new constitution in 2011 and the timing of these clear plays toward more religious voters is surely strategic. Recently, Orbán renamed his »illiberal democracy,« which did not sound well outside Hungary, as »Christian liberty« (Orbán 2019). His nationalistic reinterpretation of Christianity contradicts the writings and speeches of Pope Francis, who emphasizes its inclusive and universal character.

It is no coincidence that Hungary has witnessed a resurgence of Christendom as the political right has called upon a uniquely Hungarian Christian revisionism to consolidate support and legitimize their political strategy with the backing of a Christian God. Religion has become an important mainstay of right-wing populist support in Hungary, though the substance and sincerity of the right's appeal to Christianity was questionable (Ádám/Bozóki 2016b). Indeed, as a state with a generally secular society, the Hungarian right's adoption of Christianity and Christian values as a rallying cry was intriguing. To be sure, the church is more a political tool for the governing populist right than the government is for Christianity.

An aspect of Fidesz's cultural policy that has become more and more prominent in recent years is revanchism and the attempt to politically connect with ethnic Hungarians living outside of Hungary's borders. Nationalizing rhetoric and outreach campaigns, including the proposed easing of the naturalization process to become a Hungarian citizen, have struck a tone of almost aggressive expansion and an attempt by the radical right to appeal to the electorate abroad. Viktor Orbán's increasingly radical nationalist stances have been aimed at ethnic Hungarians living outside of Hungary's borders; the statement of Hungarian illiberalism was made during a speech to ethnic Hungarians in Romania, for example (Bozóki 2019). Fidesz's co-optation of Jobbik's revanchist policies can also be seen in the restructuring of the electoral system. The 2014 parliamentary election in which Fidesz achieved what has been called a landslide victory was the first election in which Hungarian dual citizens could vote from abroad; tellingly, about 95 percent of this international vote went to Fidesz, indicating another significant area in which Orbán's regime has benefited far-right politics.

Fidesz's propaganda machine transmits the government's messages of ethnic nationalism, paganized Christianity, and patriarchal family values with demands of law and order. Leading Fidesz politicians express their antipathy towards the Roma and people of the underclass who, according to the general view, »deserve their fate« (Field 2012: 62).

In the meantime, the government repeatedly attacks groups of the intelligentsia and the youth. First, government press fiercely attacked philosophers of the Lukács School i.e. followers of the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács. Second, non-mainstream artists, actors, and actresses, and representatives of alternative culture, became targets of the regime's nationalist propaganda. Third, there was a campaign of humiliation against the director of the National Theatre based on homophobic grounds, parallel to the Orbán regime's campaign against Hungarian writers and artists who criticized the regime abroad. Fourth, Fidesz cadres have stuffed countryside theatres, a few well-known Budapest theatres, and recently the Theatre and Film Arts University. Fifth, the self-governing body of Hungarian filmmakers was dissolved on charges of corruption that were unproven. Decisions on filmmaking are now centralized to a ministerial commissioner.

The most important refocusing occurred from culture to sports. The Prime Minister nurtures the idea of organizing Olympic Games in Budapest in the future. By declaring sports the most important part of culture, the regime is busy building football stadiums in medium-sized towns, stadiums never filled by fans. According to nationalist propaganda, sports are the major unifying force of the nation.

The Orbán regime of 2020 is largely different from its early days of 2010, although one can trace the origins of its authoritarianism to its beginning. Excessive majoritarian arguments dominated its early stage of development (Vörös 2015:182). The first step toward illiberal democracy was the unilateral writing and approval of

a new constitution, the *Fundamental Law*, by the governing party only. As a result, abusing its democratically legitimized power, the government has done away with the rule of law step by step. For instance, the fourth modification of the *Fundamental Law* in the spring of 2013 made the Constitutional Court legally possible to disregard its decisions from before 2010.

In Hungary, up until the 2014 general elections, the possibility of free and fair elections could not be excluded. Those elections, however, failed to meet the minimal requirements of the democratic process, due to the ›uneven playing field‹ of the competition. Orbán's statement on building an illiberal state in July 2014, instead of indicating the launch date of a new order, had simply promised further measures aimed at entrenching his authoritarian system. By that time the regime had the unfair elections safely behind it, and was just done with changing rules for municipal election in Budapest, just a few months before balloting. Four years later, in 2018, nationwide elections were unfree and unfair.

The system has undergone massive change over the years which is best evidenced by some actions. One of them is hiring of enforcers to block violently the opposition's attempt at initiating a referendum and the public prosecutor's failure to press charges. There is a division of labor between Fidesz leadership and the football ultras by which police is ›liberated‹ from doing their job, since it is outsourced to street fighting, criminal groups.

Second, the state used vehement anti-immigrant propaganda campaign during the government-initiated referendum in 2016 as well as in the electoral campaign of 2018, by which the incumbent party used taxpayers' money illegally for campaigning. All of the few refugees who came to Hungary were kept at the border quarantine in inhuman conditions, considering them as criminals, without letting them enter the country.

Third, by using its overwhelming political and economic power, the government managed to close *Népszabadság*, the biggest left-liberal newspaper, just as to fundamentally redirect the position of *Origo* and *Index*, the most popular internet news sites, and put pro-government newspapers under one directorate (KESMA) controlled by the propaganda minister.

Fourth, discriminatory laws on public and higher education gave central control over high school and university students, aiming to significantly reduce the number of university students. The well-known Hungarian-American Central European University (CEU), established by George Soros, has been forced out from Hungary by the discriminatory legislation of the regime, while the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) has been deprived of its network of research institutes (Kovács/Trencsényi 2020: 379-432). Further plans have been revealed to ›integrate‹ some universities to reduce their number, and recently, the regime reorganized former state universities into regime controlled private foundations, led by loyalists. Young scholars are leaving the country on a large scale.

Fifth, one should note the aggressive handling of civic organizations. As it was mentioned in public debates, independent NGOs must be swept out of Hungarian public life because they interlope in politics. This was followed by discriminatory legislation against NGOs, which had received foreign funds. In 2020, the European Court of Justice annulled this legislation, but the political damage could not be eliminated.

The language used by the regime serves to hide reality. Propagandistic mass communication, a questionnaire sent to all citizens with a set of biased or manipulative questions, is called ›national consultation‹. With this, the primary goal of Fidesz was to refresh the list of its supporters. ›Protection‹ stands for the collection of protection money. In reality, the ›defense‹ of retirement benefits means the requisitioning of pensions by the state. Utility-cost cuts have led to higher prices and deteriorating services. The protection of the Hungarian people has resulted in the impoverishment of large segments of the population. As corruption became the norm and a part of daily routine, it has become invisible to the public. Apart from public work programs for the poorest of the poor, utility-cost cuts benefiting the well-off, and a flat tax, the system gains legitimacy through investments demonstrating the symbolic power of the ruling elite, nationalist campaigns and government-generated xenophobia.

The Orbán regime gradually evolved from its larval stage and today it stands fully formed. This is not to suggest that the leader of the regime follows a pre-calculated blueprint. The authoritarian direction was clear, but there were lots of incidental events, spontaneous reactions, contradictory policies, and periods of slower or faster speed of change, as the political situation allowed. Since 2014 the regime is not only illiberal, but anti-democratic. Moreover, due to the constraining power of the European Union, by now the Orbán regime appears to be relatively more liberal than democratic. The EU is more equipped to sanction deviations in human rights than the deconstruction of democracy. In this regime, a few fundamental rights (freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, right to privacy, freedom of movement) remain protected despite the autocratic monopolization of politics. In essence, it is an emerging authoritarian setup which could be moderately tamed by the EU with regard to basic human rights and civil liberties (Bozóki/Hegedűs (2018:6). In other words, the international embeddedness of the Orbán regime hinders, or makes slower, its slide toward authoritarianism. Because of this external constraint, the leaders of the Orbán regime have been forced to engage in Janus-faced methods, double talk, double standards, and pay lip service to democratic values, in short, to pursue a hypocritical behavior that they would not do under other circumstances. The government tries to justify their anti-democratic policies by appealing to democratic norms, which softens the autocratic nature of the regime. The regime uses a rhetoric that exploits xenophobia, a nationalist interpre-

tation of Christianity, so as to throw off the European Union's liberal democratic rule of law with limited success.

Orbán treats Hungary as his own holding and therefore benefits, via stooges and family members, from these investments. His regime does not seem to tolerate autonomous, independent actors and institutions. He has a vision about a centralized, personalized, clan state and a vertically controlled, dependent society. Independent cultural activities are considered oppositional, still the regime cannot replace culture with propaganda. In sum, in this regime economic policy serves social inequality, ethno-nationalism, and re-feudalization. While opposition forces may win in several electoral districts in by-elections, their hope for victory in the general elections is much constrained. The ruling political clique combines political and economic tools to maintain its power, yet it lacks the intellectual and moral support of the largest part of society. The regime relies on its political loyalists, while it divides and neutralizes its potential opponents, no matter whether they are passive or active.

It appears the downward spiral continues, regardless the country's membership in the European Union. The contradictory character of this hybrid regime (i.e. undemocratic practices behind democratic facade) can also be explained by the real tension between domestic power and external organizations, such as the European Union. The regime had promised to re-politicize the public sphere and to mobilize the political community, but it ended up with no politics just central propaganda and confused, chaotic public administration. Political decisions like extreme centralization, governing by decrees, and closing the borders at the time of the pandemic underlined the xenophobic, ethnic nationalist nature of the regime. The idea of a »strong state«, to which supporters of the regime like to refer, is rather a »deep state« where corruption is an embedded, legislated and networked phenomenon. This rising authoritarian regime poses a danger not just to its own citizens but to its democratic neighbours and to the international community in the European Union.

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