HUNGARY: POPULISM OR POLITICS?

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The Hungarian political spectrum has been one of the most polarised bipolar party systems of all the former socialist countries. For the last twenty years, the heirs of the communist elite have gathered under the flag of the Socialist Party (MSZP) while the conservatives have rallied around Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán. The Socialists were in government for three mandates and Fidesz is currently in its third term. Of the Visegrad Four states (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary), Hungary's public is the most inclined to question whether actual regime change occurred. The country has been a member of NATO since 1999 and the EU since 2004, but in several election campaigns it has been usual to hear "we need to finish the regime change *now*".

Hungary has never disclosed the entirety or even large parts of the secret service's archives from the times of the one-party system before 1989. It served the Hungarian political elite well to delegitimise each other by claiming that someone collaborated with the secret police in the past. It provided blackmailing opportunities and set press agendas. As an example, Péter Medgyessy, the Socialist prime minister elected in 2002, was forced out two years later when revelations about his past as a paid agent of the secret service were widely published. All these examples and social context show how antagonistic Hungarian political life has become. Since 2002, when Fidesz narrowly lost the elections after taking power for the first time in 1998, the polarisation of society has reached family levels. Unlike in neighbouring countries, politics is omnipresent.

In this environment, Viktor Orbán was able to rise to the height of his power in 2010, when he won the elections with a constitutional majority – two-thirds of the seats in parliament – and readily delivered a new constitution for the country that curtailed press freedom and the independence of the judiciary. Fidesz rode a wave of anti-establishment sentiment. It was based on the weak performance of the Socialist

government and exacerbated by the effects of the financial crisis in 2008. Fidesz offered to chase the corrupt Socialist elite away and "bring the people back to power". Like Donald Trump, who threatened to lock up Hillary Clinton during the US presidential campaign, Orbán threatened to throw the former Socialist prime minister into jail – though he never followed up on this threat.

Just like the conservative political group in the European Parliament, Fidesz uses the phrase "people's party" without any negative association. The catch-all message, populist initiatives and rhetoric are used to maintain popular support and rally the electorate around the flag. Fidesz even introduced a new term for the political community it wished to preserve after its landslide victory in 2010: the "System of National Cooperation" or NER (*Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere*). It was a one-page political declaration that people must rise above party lines and unite for the sake of the nation. The paper had to be displayed in all public offices. The NER was a tool for portraying the opposition as outcasts who acted against the nation's interests. With the anti-pluralist move the newly established government claimed the exclusive right to represent the people.

This sentiment has not faded away; it has grown and has increasingly included non-domestic actors. By the time the elections of 2014 approached, Fidesz had found new elites to fight against: the Brussels elite and bureaucracy, the technocrats and later Jean-Claude Juncker in person. The government had serious sovereignty debates with the Commission in the first years after the otherwise successful Hungarian presidency of the European Council in 2011. There was a large populist campaign against the IMF as the root of all things bad. The previous Socialist government made an IMF-World Bank-EU troika deal that opened a €20 billion credit line and demanded serious austerity measures just before the election. Fidesz promised not to use such credit and to start repaying this debt. Even grassroots fundraisers were launched in the country after internalising the government message. Fidesz has managed to decrease the debt-to-GDP ratio since 2011, although with questionable measures such as the nationalisation of private pension funds. The nominal debt has risen only slowly over the last years.

The migration wave on the Balkan route since 2015 has offered the opportunity for the government to revive antagonistic debates in simplified terms. The chastised actors were the European Commission (allegedly unable to provide solutions), Angela Merkel (for "inviting" more migration by the opening of the German borders) and the EU as a whole (for trying to enforce the mandatory resettlement/ relocation schemes that were actually never realised). This political rhetoric ended up in a referendum in the fall of 2016 when Fidesz wanted to deliver a resonating message to Brussels to refuse mandatory quotas and reinforce national sovereignty. But the migration referendum did not pass the validity threshold as voter turnout remained below 50%. However, over three million voters showed up to support

the government's position, which was more than the average number of Fidesz voters at parliamentary elections.

It is important to bear in mind that Fidesz is not the most right-wing party in Hungary. The Jobbik party has an extremist track record of anti-Semitic and anti-Roma rhetoric and is trending at around 20% in opinion polls. It has visibly softened its demeanour during the third Orbán government, leaving a void for future radical parties and at the same time tempting Fidesz to step further to the right. Fidesz has been accused of not having opposed Jobbik more clearly, although it has tried to avoid anti-Semitism, holding the Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year in 2014, sponsoring the renovation of synagogues and driving dialogue with Jewish organisations.

Fidesz's dominance of political discourse is due to the fact that the opposition remained fragmented for two consecutive elections, while private media ownership shifted in favour of Fidesz, which also managed to capture the public media for its own agenda. Three typical populist features are present here: 1) anti-expert rhetoric; 2) post-truth politics; and 3) the renationalisation of politics. Feelings of anti-expert and anti-civil society rhetoric were emboldened by a campaign against NGOs that were accused of being foreign agents. Two Norwegian Fund-related NGOs, Ökotárs and DemNet Foundations, were searched by the police. George Soros, the liberal Hungarian-born philanthropist and his Open Society Foundations were repeatedly targeted in the media. The first large-scale appearance of post-truth politics happened during the migration crisis: false claims, fake news and completely contradictory narratives invaded the Hungarian media. Finally, it is clear that Viktor Orbán's foreign political attitude is that of a classical realist (in the sense of International Relations theory). He claims sovereignty as the starting point for any negotiations. Renationalisation of politics is the leading line in the EU debates ("bring back competences to the member states") and in the Hungarian-US relationship during the Obama administration ("no foreign interference in the Hungarian democracy").

Fidesz was ahead of its time in the sense of being a party able to capitalise on a growing anti-establishment sentiment by channelling it first against the Socialist government. Later Fidesz was successful in shifting the antagonism to the international level and diverting attention from domestic debates. In other words, Fidesz did *not* become the establishment in the eyes of its voters despite its second consecutive cycle in office. Given Hungary's size it is a feasible political manoeuvre to replace domestic conflictual narratives with international ones that can be shaped more easily in the given party's interests, as the electorate has less direct experience of them.