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More Power, Less Support: The Fidesz Government and the Coronavirus Pandemic in Hungary

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom suggests that populists thrive in times of crisis. However, for populist radical right parties in government, managing a genuine calamity is both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, crises provide the opportunity to project leadership and quell opposition to their rule. On the other hand, crisis response requires competence. Probably the most successful governing populist radical right party in the European Union, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, did not resolve this tension entirely adequately in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the party consolidated its grip on power, the high human and economic costs of mismanaging the second and third waves of the pandemic started to erode its popular support. In ideational terms, the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated the populist, nativist and authoritarian tendencies that had long characterized the party.

Keywords: populism; pandemic; Hungary; Fidesz; European Union

Conventional wisdom suggests that populists thrive in times of crisis. This stands to reason: crisis situations tend to challenge 'the establishment' against which populists define themselves (Cox 2017). Crises also call for strong leadership and throw up easily identifiable enemies against whom 'the people' can be mobilized, which presents excellent opportunities for populists to portray themselves as saviours from economic hardship and moral decay (Moffitt 2015). Following the global economic crisis of 2008, populist radical right parties' share of the vote increased noticeably in Europe and propelled a number of such parties into government (Caiani and Graziano 2019; Kriesi and Pappas 2015). Scholarship has also demonstrated that populist radical right parties benefited electorally from the refugee crisis of 2014–2016 (e.g. van der Burg and Harteveld 2021). It is thus no surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the globe in 2020, arguably the

gravest of recent crises, is widely believed to have created fertile ground for a further advance of populist forces.

Yet, the relationship between crisis and populism is fuzzier than generally assumed. Particularly for populists in government, managing a genuine calamity is both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, emergencies call for the projection of leadership, often of a charismatic nature, to galvanize the country into action, creating excellent photo-ops for political leaders in hard hats or, more fittingly in the current crisis, inspecting hospitals in full personal protective equipment (PPE). The urgency of the situation means that there is little or no time for deliberation and constitutional systems of checks and balances can be – for parties with authoritarian tendencies – conveniently put aside. ‘Specific, dramatic, and sharply focused’ international events call for unity, a ‘rallying around the flag’, boosting government popularity (Mueller 1970). Opposition parties or critics can be labelled as unpatriotic for not supporting ‘the national effort’ to alleviate harm caused by the crisis. And perhaps most importantly, populist leaders can enjoy almost undivided attention as they claim to serve ‘the will of the people’.

On the other hand, managing an actual crisis – rather than one created by the populists themselves (Moffitt 2015) – requires competence: no amount of bombastic success rhetoric can boost or maintain government support infinitely if progress does not materialize on the ground. Competent crisis management may in turn require recourse to technical or scientific expertise, which sits uneasily with a distrust of experts and anti-intellectualism, a typical feature of populism (Wiles 1970). Effective policy measures against transnational or global phenomena, such as a pandemic, also depend on international cooperation. This can be difficult to reconcile with populists’ characteristic hostility to global actors and foreign intrusion alongside a professed belief in the superiority of the right-wing populists’ own nation (Friedman 2018).

This article in the special issue investigates this tension with respect to a key example of a governing populist radical right (PRR) party, Fidesz in Hungary, led by one of the EU’s longest-serving prime ministers, Viktor Orbán, as a case study of policy decisions and narratives evolving as a function of the contradictory pressures of populism and responsible government. Specifically, how can we characterize the Fidesz government’s policy response to the pandemic? How did Fidesz frame the pandemic response politically, and to what extent can we detect the main ideational tenets of the populist radical right in this framing? And finally, to what extent was the Fidesz government able to capitalize on the crisis to boost its popularity or, conversely, to what extent did the pandemic erode support? These are the main research questions that structure the analysis below. To answer them, the article draws on a wide range of sources: legislation, policy documents, comment and analysis in the press, public opinion and pandemic data. To study the framing of the crisis response, the speeches of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s published on his official website in 2020 and 2021 were used as the most evidently authoritative source.

The article is structured as follows. First, it clarifies some of the key concepts employed in the analysis, complementing the discussion in the introductory article to this special issue (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022). Then, a section provides some background on the country case. The subsequent section reviews the course

of the pandemic in Hungary as well as the main policy measures introduced to combat it. Next, we consider how these events were framed by the government, linking this discussion to the key ideational tenets of PRR parties. The next section focuses on the opposition parties' reactions to Fidesz's policy and public opinion to trace how citizens evaluated the Fidesz crisis response. A brief conclusion summarizes the findings.

Key concepts

Populism and the populist radical right are subject to a burgeoning academic literature and are also common terms in journalistic parlance – albeit often used imprecisely. In line with Cas Mudde's (2007) definition, the populist radical right is taken to mean political forces that feature at least three characteristics: nativism, populism and authoritarianism. The first of these refers to xenophobic nationalism: the idea that the 'native' majority population is superior to, and needs to be defended from the threat posed by, foreigners, be they immigrants, indigenous minorities or international finance. Populism is defined as a set of ideas that not only portrays society as divided between two antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', but also argues that politics is about respecting popular sovereignty by any means (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). It is worth noting that in the European context, nativism and populism also translate into hard or soft Euroscepticism, since PRR parties tend to view the EU as an elitist project and European integration as a threat to (popular) sovereignty (Pirro et al. 2018; Pirro and van Kessel 2017; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008; Taggart 1998). Finally, in the context of the PRR, authoritarianism refers to a notion of society where anything that is not seen to be in line with traditional values is to be repressed.

However, authoritarianism also has another meaning, essentially as a deformation of the democratic political order. In this context, authoritarianism is associated with autocracy: the use of 'political parties, legislatures, elections, and other institutions typically associated with democracies to lessen the [leaders'] risk of overthrow' (Frantz 2016). Juan Linz's (1964) classic definition focuses on authoritarian leaders' tendency to limit political pluralism, suppress the opposition and extend the prerogatives of the executive – all of which have been in evidence in many countries around the world during the pandemic. V-Dem's pandemic backsliding index (2020a), for instance, maps a tendency in a large number of democracies to use discriminatory measures, infringe citizens' rights and liberties, set limitations on the legislature with or without time limits and restrict media freedom in the wake of the virus.

With the definitions of PRR and authoritarianism dealt with, it is worth commenting on two additional key concepts that have been relatively neglected in the comparative politics literature but loom large in policy studies. Leadership, or more precisely, leadership in crisis management is the first. There is wide agreement that leadership is a must-have for tackling whatever calamity is at hand, but it is rarely clear what it consists of or how it can be recognized. Arjen Boin et al.'s (2013: 81) framework for evaluating performance in crisis management can be helpful in this regard: leadership should be seen as effective if it organizes, directs and implements actions that minimize the impact of the threat, forge cooperation

among previously unrelated agents and fulfil ‘a symbolic need for direction and guidance’. These dimensions can be operationalized into a set of discrete tasks, from early recognition of the problem to framing the crisis in a way that inspires confidence and creates a narrative that connects with society’s (or an organization’s) key values. Applied to PRR responses to COVID, this would imply forging a link between the pandemic response and the tenets of nativism, populism and authoritarianism.

As discussed below, Fidesz did forge these symbolic links to its core ideational foundations. But does this also mean that its management of the coronavirus crisis should be seen as a ‘success’? Even from the government’s perspective, crisis responses can be evaluated along multiple dimensions, such as ‘reputational protection, enhancement, and popular support; ability to manage policy and political agendas with as little backfire as possible; and capacity to maintain long-term governance/ideological visions’ (Weible et al. 2020: 236). Thus, it is possible for a measure to be ‘successful’ in purely partisan terms, but a ‘failure’ in policy terms or vice versa – for instance when draconian lockdown measures slow the spread of the virus but cost dearly in terms of popular support (Weible et al. 2020). Governing PRR parties need to succeed in both, and this is what makes their task so difficult.

The political context in Hungary

Hungary’s dubious distinction in the political science literature of the past decade is to have produced what is by most measures the most successful PRR party in the EU: Fidesz. Led by Viktor Orbán since 1993, the party secured a qualified majority in the National Assembly in the 2010, 2014 and 2018 elections, albeit having modified the electoral system in its own favour, in the latter two cases with just 45% and 49%, respectively, of the popular vote. Nonetheless, the party enjoyed the support, at times, of over 50% of the electorate – leading the polls at all times by a very large margin, thus clearly demonstrating that PRR parties can reconcile governmental responsibilities with stable, high levels of support, thanks, in the case of Fidesz, to ‘generous, if selective, social policies’ and EU largesse (Grzymala-Busse 2019; Kelemen 2017). This was aided by the fact that Fidesz faced no serious electoral threat in the past decade, with two exceptions. In the first case, Fidesz’s main challenger was another PRR party, Jobbik, which outflanked Orbán’s party on the right until the mid-2010s. Then, however, riding and to a large extent creating anti-immigrant sentiment in the wake of the refugee crisis, Fidesz stabilized its position. Jobbik splintered after a controversial decision by its leaders to tone down its radical rhetoric and move towards the mainstream, following an explicit strategy of refashioning Jobbik into a ‘people’s party’.

Orbán’s fragmented opposition on the centre-left consisted of the rump and an off-shoot of the Socialist Party as well as newer liberal/green parties, Politics Can Be Different, Dialogue for Hungary and youth movement Momentum. The centre-left was blighted by infighting and irreconcilable ideological differences with Jobbik, preventing it from mounting an effective, coordinated electoral attack against Fidesz from 2010 to 2019. In the October 2019 local elections, however, a coordinated opposition campaign successfully challenged the governing party in several

important contests, winning, most significantly, the mayoral election of Budapest as well as several county seats. With the potential of unity thus demonstrated, following tortuous coordination efforts the opposition parties formally agreed on a joint list and electoral platform for the 2022 parliamentary elections just before Christmas 2020. In the first months of 2021, the united opposition was neck and neck, and according to some pollsters, ahead of Fidesz in terms of electoral support for the first time in a decade.

As for Fidesz's record in office, democratic backsliding is well documented in the literature (e.g. Bartha et al. 2020; Bozoki and Hegedus 2018). The qualified majority in parliament was used to cement the party's rule in every conceivable area, from adopting a new constitution single-handedly to taking over most supposedly independent institutions, including to some extent judicial administration and, perhaps most significantly, the media. The electoral system was tailored and re-tailored to Fidesz's partisan advantage. There is little doubt that, combined, these measures amount to 'deliberate, intended action designed to gradually undermine the fundamental rules of the game' – that is, a textbook case of de-democratization (Bakke and Sitter 2020).

As the 'occupation of the state' progressed, Fidesz did not neglect the other two key strategies in the populists' playbook either (Müller 2016): considerable effort was devoted to enriching a network of friendly oligarchs (clientelism) and repressing critical civil society. Orbán's childhood friend Lőrinc Mészáros, by training a gas-fitter, led *Forbes* magazine's list of richest Hungarians in 2020. A 2017 law sought to stigmatize NGOs as 'foreign funded' and a 2017 amendment of the Higher Education Act forced the country's highest-ranked university, the Central European University, to move its seat to neighbouring Austria. In 2020, V-Dem classified Hungary as the EU's first (and so far only) non-democracy, the country having slipped on relevant indicators since 2010 to such an extent that it was reclassified as an electoral authoritarian regime (V-Dem 2020b). In the same year, Freedom House rated Hungary as partly free and classified it as a transitional or hybrid regime (Freedom House 2021). In some scholarly analyses Hungary is now labelled as fully authoritarian (e.g. Vachudova 2020).

Fidesz skilfully capitalized on all major crises in recent times to help to bring about this degree of centralization of power. The recession brought by the 2008 global economic crisis was a key reason for the party's landslide victory in 2010. This then proved sufficient for the party's continuing electoral dominance: as Viktor Orbán had famously said while in opposition, 'we only have to win once, but then properly' (Lendvai 2017: 94). From a partisan perspective, the 2015 refugee crisis, with thousands of migrants and refugees crossing Hungary en masse on their way to Western Europe, was also a godsend to Fidesz, since it presented the perfect opportunity to recapture ground from Jobbik by pushing a hard-line xenophobic anti-immigration and Eurosceptic message (Batory 2021). Throughout his period in office, no significant flood of Hungary's major rivers passed without Orbán visiting personally to direct emergency relief on the spot, resulting in ample press coverage showing the prime minister in rubber boots. But in early 2020, a disaster of a different magnitude appeared in Europe, putting the prime minister's crisis management skills to severe test.

Policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic

When news of a novel coronavirus reached Hungary, there was little cause for optimism as to the country's ability to withstand the shock. The demographic profile of the population was relatively elderly and considerably more prone to obesity, cancer and heart disease than the EU average. The healthcare system was underfunded to start with and public expenditure further declined on Orbán's watch, from 7.5% of GDP in 2010 to 6.7% in 2018 (Eurostat 2021). Many hospitals outside Budapest had been renovated with EU funds, but others remained in a sorry state, and there was a shortage of medical professionals as droves of doctors and nurses had left for more lucrative and less stressful jobs in wealthier member states of the EU. The National Public Health and Medical Officer Service, which would have played a key role in public health emergencies, had been abolished in 2017, and the new organization taking over its tasks, headed by a partisan appointee, remained less effective. By early 2020, only one of the previously existing seven labs licensed to carry out PCR testing remained in operation, creating a severe testing capacity shortage (Lantos 2020).

The government quickly recognized the threat posed by COVID and put in place a set of measures, coordinated and implemented in a centralized, command and control manner (Hajnal and Kovacs 2020). Much of the response was militarized early on: the chief coordinating body, the Coronavirus Task Force, established on 31 January, consisted of only one medical professional alongside the relevant ministries' officials, and its operations were run by law enforcement personnel. At the end of March military officers took command of 51 of the country's 108 hospitals as well as several private companies deemed to be of strategic importance (Hajnal and Kovacs 2020). On 11 March, the government declared a state of emergency and on 30 March parliament authorized rule by decree.

The substantive policy measures were in line with those observed in most other European countries and introduced at speed. The first two cases of infection were detected on 4 March. By 16 March, the first travel restrictions were in place, schools closed, and by the end of the month all public and social events (apart from family gatherings) ceased and all but the essential shops closed. In April, as one of the most controversial measures, hospitals were ordered to free up 36,000 beds (60% of the total capacity) in order to accommodate an expected peaking of infections, at a time when there were only approximately 8,000 cases detected (Hajnal and Kovacs 2020: 317). This resulted in many hospitals discharging severely ill and/or post-operation patients. Measures to alleviate the economic consequences of the pandemic were also announced, in the form of tax benefits, home office and flexible working hours regulations, and freezing loan repayments. The first wave peaked around the third week of April, and with rapidly improving indicators in May, the lockdown measures were quickly eased. On 17 June the Operational Task Force announced, amidst celebration, that the country had defeated the virus.

Hungary indeed emerged from the first wave as one of the countries that escaped the worst. Fatalities remained under 600, a sad but relatively low figure for a country of 10 million people. The early, decisive lockdown measures clearly contributed to this outcome (Galvan and Quarleri 2020), but probably so did a range of other factors – as indicated by the fact that the 'new' EU member states in Central and

Eastern Europe generally recorded much lower infection and fatality rates than those in Western Europe. In Hungary, however, some of the first-wave responses drew intense criticism from health policy experts. For instance, as in many other countries, initially there was a massive shortage of PPE for medical professionals. Then, the government invested heavily in the headline-grabbing purchase of thousands of ventilators from China, neglecting to factor in the fact that there were only several hundred nurses trained to work intensive care unit (ICU) shifts in the whole country, or that a large proportion of doctors in primary care were over the age of 65 and thus at high risk for COVID (Lantos 2020). The rate of testing remained among the lowest in the EU throughout the period (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control – ECDC 2021a), which some commentators suspected was intentional to ensure that infection numbers appeared low.

Nonetheless, with COVID-19 apparently beaten and most restrictions lifted, Hungarians took to the beaches of Lake Balaton and other popular domestic holiday destinations with relish (the government advised against international travel). Predictably, this resulted in infection numbers picking up again at the end of the summer. Data from the ECDC showed solid growth in September and from October an exponential growth in cases and death notification figures, until the second wave peaked in late December 2020–early January 2021 (ECDC 2021b). As elsewhere in Europe, this autumn–winter second wave was much more severe than the spring first wave. By late February 2021 over 14,000 people had died of the disease – a more than 20-fold increase as compared to fatalities until the summer. As of 20 February 2021, Hungary had suffered more COVID deaths relative to the size of the population than most neighbouring countries (144 per 100,000 as compared to 116 in Slovakia, 101 in Romania or 94 in Austria; Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2021).

Despite the drastically worse public health situation, the countermeasures were less restrictive than in the spring, which Orbán explained by the need to focus on restarting the economy. Although distancing and wearing a mask (including on the street) remained obligatory, primary schools stayed open throughout the winter. While the government closed borders to international travel at the beginning of September, the avid football fan prime minister made an exception for the UEFA Super Cup, which was allowed to go ahead, including opening the borders to tens of thousands of football supporters to attend the game on 24 September in Budapest (Euro 2020 games were also hosted in full-capacity stadiums in summer 2021). According to Oxford University's pandemic response tracker, until the end of October Hungary's measures were less stringent than those of any neighbouring country save Croatia (Hale et al. 2020).

In early November secondary schools closed and a nightly curfew was introduced, but initially only between 1 and 5 a.m. It became evident that state-organized testing capacity remained too low to keep track of the spread of the virus and the price cap imposed on private providers was set too low, causing many labs to stop the service. The summer months were not used to prepare for contact tracing in the second wave and quarantine compliance checks were left to the police, who were only sporadically able to carry them out. The focus of interventions was restarting the economy through wage subsidies, tax breaks and a gradual reintroduction of an extra month's pension payment. The government also

approved a significant increase in salaries for doctors while restricting the common practice of working in both public hospitals and private practice.

Fidesz seemed to put its greatest hope in ‘vaccine diplomacy’. In addition to the vaccines approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), Orbán ordered large quantities of the Russian and Chinese vaccines – in line with the government’s ‘Eastern opening’, a general reorientation of Hungary’s foreign policy from the EU towards Russia and China. In January the government also relaxed the criteria for vaccine approval by the Hungarian drugs regulator: any vaccine administered to over 1 million people was deemed safe, a determination to be made by the minister for foreign trade. The Sinopharm and Sputnik vaccines were rolled out from February 2021 despite the lack of EMA approval for their use in the EU.

Around the same time Orbán acknowledged that Hungary was entering the third wave of the pandemic: the countermeasures employed up to that date had clearly been insufficient to slow down the spread of the virus. Primary schools and nurseries were then also closed (secondary schools, higher education institutions, entertainment venues and restaurants had been closed since November; ECDC 2021b). However, in search of a success story, Orbán focused almost exclusively on the vaccine roll-out, which, thanks to the availability of Sinopharm and Sputnik as well as EU-sourced and -approved vaccines, was indeed proceeding faster than in many other EU countries. The third wave peaked around the middle of April 2021. In those weeks and in early May 2021, Hungary recorded the highest mortality numbers globally, with 284 deaths per 100,000 population (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2021) – a damning verdict on Fidesz’s crisis response. As of the end of May, almost 30,000 people had died of COVID-19 in Hungary (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2021).

The politics of pandemic response

How the policy response was framed by Fidesz is the next subject to tackle. Rather than a chronological review of events, the following discussion is organized in line with the key ideational tenets of PRR parties: nativism and its corollaries, populism and authoritarianism.

Nativism and its offshoots

Nativism was clearly detectable in Fidesz’s communication on the pandemic. The first manifestation of this was classic xenophobia. Conveniently for the government, the first detected cases of COVID-19 were Iranian students studying in Budapest, which lent itself to the narrative that ‘foreign students are unwilling to comply with the rules and thus spread the disease’ (19 June 2020).¹ Orbán made the link between ‘illegal migration’ and the spread of the virus early on and consequently strict border controls were a major plank of the pandemic response throughout the period.

A second manifestation of a search for ‘foreigners’ to blame was Fidesz’s pronounced Eurocepticism, which had long characterized the party’s rhetoric and policies. Especially in the wake of EU (and global) criticism of the excesses of the authorization for emergency rule (of which more below), the prime minister

often contrasted his own decisive crisis measures with the alleged incompetence and inaction of ‘Brussels’: for example, ‘In Brussels they sit in some sort of bubble, [and] tell others what to do instead of saving lives’ (3 April 2010). This narrative unfolded amidst the Hungarian and Polish governments’ joint efforts to block the EU’s Multi-annual Financial Framework in order to fend off the introduction of rule-of-law conditionalities in EU payments. During the third wave, Orbán’s criticism focused on the deficiencies of the EU vaccine distribution programme.

However, as in the past several years, criticism of the EU appeared as merely one segment of a more comprehensive conspiracy theory. Starting in 2013 and particularly since the 2015 refugee crisis, the bogeyman for Fidesz, used as a symbol of a global network of ‘liberal elites’, had been American financier and philanthropist George Soros, to whom almost mythical powers were attributed. In the 2018 election, ‘the central Fidesz claim was that Brussels and Soros were scheming to flood Europe with Muslim migrants, and that a Fidesz loss would mean the doom of white, Christian Hungary’ (Krekó and Enyedi 2018: 48). The strategy to make the ‘Soros theme’ relevant to the pandemic was to connect the latter to migration. The logic can be summed up as: Soros orchestrates illegal migration; migration fuels the pandemic; ergo Soros and those in his pay, including ‘Brussels’ and much of the Hungarian opposition, are ultimately to blame for the crisis. Two questions on Soros and ‘Brussels’ featured in the summer ‘national consultation’ on the pandemic (about which more below) too, to further propagate the conspiracy theory.

Populism

Orbán and other Fidesz leaders’ refrain of a global liberal conspiracy of billionaires, EU officials and assorted critics speaks not only to nativism (mobilizing against the ‘foreign’) but also anti-elitism, a key plank of populism, and arguably the most challenging one for governing populists since they are, in fact, the elite (Krekó 2021). Orbán resolved this contradiction by maintaining a strong ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative (Hegedüs 2019), claiming that his government was the ‘underdog’ in its external relations and reconstructing the elite as, basically, the ‘Soros network’ – that is, everyone critical of the Hungarian government (Csehi 2019; Enyedi 2016). A corollary to anti-elitism is populist leaders’ tendency to portray themselves as ‘common men’; a key ‘skill’ in this regard is the populist leader’s claim to ‘read’ the public’s mind, so as ‘to present and proclaim, not to represent, the essentialist will of the people’ (Abts and Rummens 2007: 408).

The Orbán government is an innovator in this respect, having institutionalized ‘national consultations’ on what it deems to be the important questions of the day. The consultation questionnaires were mailed to every Hungarian household and could also be filled in online. Since there were no procedural guarantees, the results were not verified by any independent body, and the questions were formulated in a way so as to steer the respondent to the ‘correct’ answer, the consultations should be considered as a method for manipulating rather than detecting public opinion (Batory and Svensson 2019). Nonetheless, the consultations – seven between 2010 and 2020 – enabled Fidesz to claim that policy measures were introduced as a direct expression of the *volonté générale*, without embarking on the riskier

enterprise of holding a referendum (Orbán's only attempt while in government failed due to low turnout).

The pandemic merited a national consultation in summer 2020, with a second consultation announced in early 2021 to be rolled out in the subsequent months. According to statements by various government officials, some 1.7 million respondents had filled in the summer questionnaire by October 2020 (the exact figure cannot be ascertained since the consultation had no publicly available official record), with a large majority supporting the wearing of masks, social distancing and a number of other standard policy measures. Again according to government sources, a large majority also answered in the affirmative questions such as 'Brussels wants to force us to change the provisions of our basic law against migration. Should the Hungarian government keep the ban on immigration even if this means an open conflict with Brussels?' Clearly, the link between such questions and the pandemic measures was at best tenuous, indicating that, as in the case of earlier consultations (Enyedi 2016), the exercise was an instrument of 'top-down rule' and propaganda rather than a genuine effort to elicit policy input from the electorate. The results of the ill-timed second consultation were announced in late March 2021 and, perhaps inconveniently for Fidesz, showed strong support for relaxing control measures just as the number of fatalities broke records each day and the worst of the third wave was still to come.

Authoritarianism

The pandemic led to civil rights and liberties curtailed in large parts of the world as governments tried to mount an effective crisis response. The question in each such case is whether restrictions are proportional to the risk and limited in time or permanent. Concerns voiced internationally suggested that the changes introduced by Fidesz in 2020 failed the proportionality test and many feared were irreversible, leading to a further shrinking of political pluralism in Hungary. The Orbán government seized sweeping emergency powers at the end of March under the so-called Authorization Act, approved by the Fidesz majority in parliament without the support of the opposition. Following international condemnation, and after the first wave of the pandemic subsided, Orbán ostensibly returned his emergency powers, but in fact reintroduced them in a different guise, creating the prerogative for the government to declare a 'state of medical emergency' without parliamentary approval, which it immediately exercised (Eötvös Károly Institute 2020).

Spreading misinformation about the pandemic was introduced as a criminal offence punishable by five years' imprisonment and used for investigating 'virus-sceptic' private citizens. Several measures had the effect of weakening opposition-held local governments, notably Budapest: taxes collected by local governments were cut and parking was made free (parking fees were an important revenue source for the city), ostensibly to help enterprises to cope with the crisis. Legislation was passed to enable the government to designate sites as special economic zones, thereby depriving notably opposition-held municipalities of tax revenues raised from enterprises operating in the zones. State subsidies to political parties were cut by half to help finance the pandemic response, which clearly hurt the opposition parties much more than Fidesz. Using the pandemic as

distraction rather than justification, the electoral system was also tweaked again, raising the bar for the opposition parties to run on a joint list in the 2022 elections.

Under the guise of the pandemic, the Fidesz majority in parliament also made further advances against transparency in public expenditure, making the enrichment of friendly oligarchs easier. Information on the Budapest–Belgrade railway line, a huge infrastructure project, became classified and the definition of public money was changed to exempt public enterprises from public scrutiny, while a large part of the emergency relief for the tourism industry seems to have landed in the pockets of individuals known to be close to the government, including the infamous Mr Mészáros (Martin 2021). The *coup de grâce* was delivered against the remnants of the free press, when, having been acquired by pro-government business interests, the company controlling Index, the most popular independent news portal, sacked the site's editor-in-chief and effectively took control of the site.

With the pandemic as cover, Fidesz also became more authoritarian in the sense of becoming (even) less tolerant towards what it deemed deviant or incompatible with traditional family values. The parliamentary Fidesz majority rejected the Istanbul Convention against violence against women on the grounds that it referred to gender; legislation was enacted for the exclusive (non-changeable) registration of sex at birth in June 2020. However, the credibility of Fidesz both as a bastion of Christian-conservative morals and as a champion of COVID countermeasures suffered a blow in December 2020 when a prominent Fidesz MEP, József Szájer, was spotted in Brussels escaping an all-male sex party, held in defiance of Belgian social distancing regulations, via a gutter (Hopkins and Peel 2020). But this did not stop Fidesz from amending the Basic Law later in the month with the declared aim of defending children's right to grow up in what the party considered as a 'normal' family. In the summer of the following year, all LGBT content was banned in educational materials for schools, allegedly to protect children from the promotion of homosexuality and paedophilia.

Public support for crisis measures

The opposition parties widely criticized the Fidesz pandemic response, with little evidence for a rallying-around-the-flag effect. Remarkably, while there were differences in emphasis or nuance, the centre-left parties and Jobbik largely converged in their substantive evaluation of the government's measures against the pandemic. From December 2020 the opposition parties formally agreed on a common platform and started to issue joint statements to the press, in preparation for contesting the 2022 elections as a single anti-Fidesz bloc. The most prominent politician of the opposition was Budapest mayor Gergely Karácsony – a green social-liberal who was widely credited for bringing the previously warring centre-left groups together in order to mount an effective challenge against Fidesz.

In contrast with many other countries with significant PRR parties, in Hungary no significant political force denied or dismissed the threat posed by the pandemic.² On the contrary, the opposition parties tended to criticize the government's crisis response as not stringent or vigilant enough. For instance, when the first cases of infection were detected in March 2020, the government intended to keep schools open – and made a U-turn when pressed by the opposition. The centre-left and

Jobbik also tended to push the government for stricter, earlier lockdown measures and more generous assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises and those who lost their jobs because of the pandemic. The low rate of testing, the underfunding of the healthcare sector and the delay in September–October 2020 to tackle the rapidly growing rate of infections were also recurring themes. The Democratic Coalition, the most popular of the centre-left parties in 2020, took to referring to Fidesz as ‘the panic government’, to stress what they perceived as ad hoc, uncoordinated policy measures.

There was also uniform criticism of Fidesz’s power-grab under the guise of pandemic emergency legislation, including, perhaps most significantly, taking away important local government revenue sources. The opposition made much of Fidesz-friendly oligarchs benefiting from pandemic relief (e.g. in the tourism industry), protesting against what they referred to as handouts to cronies, and seized upon examples of Fidesz officials enjoying a lavish lifestyle, sometimes in violation of government COVID advice (e.g. the minister of foreign affairs on a sea cruise when citizens were told to holiday in Hungary). And finally, there was strong criticism of the decision to roll out the Chinese and Russian vaccines in the absence of EU approval, labelled by some as a mass human experiment. Fidesz responded by claiming that the opposition was discouraging people from getting vaccinated, which the opposition parties categorically denied.

The extent to which public opinion shared the opposition’s criticisms was strongly conditioned by partisan loyalties. Fidesz supporters evaluated the crisis response in the first and the second wave very positively: 4.1 on a five-point scale where 1 is worst and 5 is best, whereas the corresponding figure for the opposition parties’ sympathizers was just 1.4, and for the electorate as a whole 2.4 (January 2021; Idea Institute 2021). But the government response in the second wave was evaluated as worse than in the first wave even by Fidesz supporters, despite the fact that the government’s intention to focus on economic recovery was in line with public preferences. While in April 2020 44% of respondents, the relative majority, felt that the ‘greatest social harm’ was many people getting ill or dying, by October 2020 this proportion had shrunk to 31%, whereas the share of those more worried about the economic impact grew from 41% to 52% in the same period (Publicus Research 2020a). At the same time, 60% of Fidesz supporters approved of ‘not having shut down the country’ in the second wave, while only 36% of the oppositions’ sympathizers did. Public satisfaction with Fidesz’s overall handling of the crisis dramatically decreased – particularly among opposition supporters, who were not satisfied to start with, but even Fidesz supporters became increasingly disillusioned from the first to the second and especially the third wave (Publicus polls for Nepszava, March and November 2020, March 2021).

The generally less positive evaluation of the government’s crisis response in the second and third waves was reflected in declining support for Fidesz, although the magnitude of the change was widely debated by the various Hungarian polling agencies, some of which were completely dependent on revenues from government sources. In any case, polls of polls showed a small gain in support for Fidesz early in the spring, boosting its already huge lead over any single opposition party, and then a decline over the autumn and winter (Politico Europe 2021; Tóka/Vox Populi 2021). The spring 2020 spike in Fidesz support may well be attributed to a

rallying-around-the-flag effect, which benefited most political leaders in Europe and around the world. However, in line with John E. Mueller's (1970) original expectations, the surge did not last: from the end of the summer to Christmas 2020, Fidesz's support decreased, according to some agencies by as much as 9% to 10% (Tóka/Vox Populi 2021 referring to Median data).

The decline in the party's support was most likely a result of the perception that the second and third waves found the country unprepared, but it can also be attributed to other factors. One may well be the juicy scandal involving Fidesz MEP József Szájer's escape from a Brussels sex-party, which almost everyone had heard about and found 'shocking' (95% and 87% of respondents, respectively; Publicus Research 2020b). More importantly, by December 2020 the opposition had managed to pull together and attack Fidesz in a (more) coordinated fashion. A significant portion of the public clearly appreciated the previously warring parties putting their differences aside: by January 2021 the united opposition overtook Fidesz in the polls. And finally, extremely high fatality numbers in the third wave eroded confidence in the party's ability to handle the situation. In sum, although Fidesz benefited from a surge of popular support early in the course of the pandemic, one year into the crisis it was faced with a situation when, for the first time in a decade, a small majority of the public was ready to boot it out of office.

Conclusion

The case of the EU's arguably most successful governing PRR party suggests that populists do thrive in times of crisis – but only initially. In line with our proposition, Orbán and his party mobilized support during the early days of the pandemic, but when it became evident that the government had not beaten the virus or averted the economic consequences for a large enough part of the population, all but the party faithful became increasingly disillusioned with Fidesz's crisis management.

The party's policy response to the pandemic is perhaps best characterized as erratic and contradictory. On the one hand, in the second wave, important control measures such as a lockdown were unreasonably delayed, and unnecessary risks (such as hosting an international football tournament in September 2020) taken. On the other, overly harsh measures were also introduced – some, such as the decision to free up 60% of the hospital bed capacity in April 2020, probably positively harmful. From a policy perspective, the government's COVID response was clearly not a success: after a relatively less grave first wave (which generally hit the post-communist EU member states less severely than some of the older member states in Western Europe), the autumn second wave found the country unprepared and, following the government's reluctance to 'shut down' lest the economy suffered more, resulted in a high death toll. In the spring 2021 third wave, the country suffered the highest fatality rates globally.

As to how Fidesz framed the politics of the pandemic, the conclusion is that the crisis merely accentuated tendencies that had long characterized the party and certainly were hallmarks of its time in office from 2010. Nativism was manifested in putting the blame for the spread of the virus on 'migrants' and those alleged to orchestrate migration. 'Brussels' was portrayed as a hindrance at best and to be in the pay of the enemies of the country at worst. Populism was detectable in

the continuing narrative of defending ‘the people’ from the ill-will of global liberal elites, and the claim not only to speak for ‘the people’ but to make policies that were merely the expression of the popular will – as discerned through the (manipulatively constructed) national consultations. And finally, authoritarianism was much in evidence, in the sense of further limiting political pluralism and also in the sense of an intolerance of lifestyles and identities deemed as deviant from the party’s reading of social mores.

While the pandemic clearly eroded electoral support, the crisis benefited Fidesz in other ways. Most notably, it provided an excellent opportunity for a power-grab – which the party did not fail to utilize. Under the guise of emergency legislation, Fidesz succeeded in tightening its already strong hold on power by shrinking the space for criticism and opposition in civil society, the media and local government. It also moved against opposition parties by decreasing the financial resources available to them and making the electoral system even less of a level playing field. These developments clearly signal the impact of the crisis in creating a pretext for cementing governing PRR parties’ hold on power and thus exacerbating democratic backsliding.

As for the partisan effects of COVID-19 in Hungary, Fidesz’s efforts to further centralize power were made all the more urgent by the fact that, for the first time in a decade, the party’s centre-left and ‘mainstreamed’ PRR competitors (Jobbik) seemed set to present a united front to Orbán in the 2022 elections and thus provide the voters with a credible alternative – and one that, if early 2021 polling data were correct, had a small but not negligible chance of winning. Fidesz’s poor performance in ‘beating the virus’ in the second and subsequent waves clearly provided powerful ammunition to the anti-Orbán coalition. But these, for the opposition parties’ supporters, positive signs should not be overstated: Fidesz remained the single most popular party in Hungary by far, propped up by its dominance of the media, control of supposedly independent institutions led by its partisan appointees, and the group of faithful oligarchs strongly invested in the status quo.

In sum, it is reasonable to predict that ‘a lingering epidemic combined with deep job losses, a prolonged recession and an unprecedented debt burden will inevitably ... turn into a political backlash’ (Fukuyama 2020: 28). More than one year into the pandemic, Fidesz had not been immune to the corrosive effects of governing during a genuine crisis but it remains an open question whether it would be able to avoid or deflect such a backlash in time for the 2022 elections. As to the wider implications of this case study, one thing that seems certain is that, as a scholar of populism put it more than half a century ago, ‘[m]ovement is easier than government’ (Wiles 1970: 168).

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Notes

1 Dates refer to Viktor Orbán’s speeches or interviews as reported on his official website, www.miniszterelnok.hu.

2 Our Homeland, a small formation with two MPs in parliament, was an exception. It followed a coronadial strategy similar to certain Western European PPR parties.

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