Populism in power in Hungary

Consolidation and ongoing radicalization

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Viktor Orbán’s ruling Fidesz party looks well placed to sweep a third successive general election on 8 April. Why is its brand of right-wing populism – famously dubbed ‘illiberal democracy’ by Orbán himself – so successful in Hungary? Ferenc Laczó investigates.

In the past decade – starting around 2006, accelerating and seemingly consolidating in 2008-11, but radicalizing even further, especially since 2015 – populism has gained ground in Hungarian politics to become its dominant feature. Since 2010, the right-wing populist style and content of politics has in fact emerged as such a conspicuous feature of its government that the Fidesz-run country is often viewed as having pioneered the illiberal turn within the European Union, a development that has more recently spread to countries such as Poland and Italy and, according to some alarmist voices, might soon threaten the entire project of European integration.

What made the populist turn possible so shortly after the Hungary’s accession to the European Union in 2004, when the transition to the western model of liberal democracy was widely considered to be virtually complete?

Beyond the absence of politically relevant European monitoring upon Hungary becoming a full member (as many scholars concede today, ironically the EU has more political leverage over candidate countries than member states), a basic reason is the decline of the master narrative of the transition period. This narrative, focused on Europeanization and catching up with the West, lost much credibility when the institutional process had been completed but many of the anticipated material benefits had failed to materialize.

The EU has certainly subsidized its poorer member states and helped alleviate some of the massive regional inequalities. But, overall, European integration has done much less to tackle the structural inequality within the union. Contrary to somewhat naïve expectations, the structural disadvantage of eastern European countries has basically been reproduced for post-transition generations as well.
Why has the populist turn proved so radical in Hungary?

The negative reason is that the post-communist left at first flourished after 1989 and only entered a crisis of reproduction with the generational changes of the early 21st century. This emerging crisis on the left was gravely exacerbated by the political scandals of 2006: just re-elected Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány’s leaked speech (in which he admitted to lying to the public), and the street riots and sharp political polarization that followed. Even before the economic crisis hit the country – and hit it exceptionally badly – the country had a leader, in power for years, who was widely perceived as lacking sufficient legitimacy to rule.

This is one point where the history of the post-communists is deeply intertwined with that of right-wing radicals: the protracted but eventually massive decline of the former went hand in hand with the spectacular rise of the latter.

The growing dominance and further radicalization of the Hungarian right has been a practically continuous process over the past decade. It is a well-known fact that the west European right underwent a process of de-radicalization after the defeat of fascism – the long-term dominance of the Christian Democrats in West Germany in many ways epitomizes this process. However, in those countries which had their own radical rightist movements and regimes before 1945 but were subsequently Sovietized, the heavy-handed postwar suppression of the right was not combined with the internal de-radicalization of right-wing ideas.

The perfect storm of the early 21st century – dissatisfaction with the actual achievements of a nominally successful transition; the discrediting of leading post-communist politicians occupying the centres of power for too long; the grave economic downturn shortly before the elections of 2010 – resulted in an electoral landslide. Jobbik went from a fringe party to a mid-sized one at the very same time that Fidesz managed to become the catch-all party of the centre without de-radicalizing its own right-wing populist agenda.

The two parties together received 70% of the vote in 2010, whereas the left and the liberals who had governed in coalition since 2002 suddenly polled less than 20%. Fidesz acquired more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament, while in political terms resembling a party of the broad centre, with two mid-sized parties respectively to its left and right. In socioeconomic and generational terms too, Fidesz voters’ profile at the time closely resembled that of society as a whole.

The notion that populism is essentially an oppositional tactic that cannot be used once parties come to power has been repeatedly asserted, but the case of Hungary reveals this assumption to be unfounded. Since 2010, Fidesz has ruled in a populist fashion and has managed to conquer one institution after another, weakening the checks and balances built into the democratic system. It has also managed to create a political-economic system where the party, the Hungarian state and the local capitalist economy are closely intertwined and key resources are largely controlled by loyalists.

While Fidesz managed to mobilize its supporters in key moments of crisis and has orchestrated numerous propaganda campaigns targeting the most diverse of opponents,
it has also come to rely heavily on a strategy of de-mobilization. The political life of the country has been short on meaningful discussions and debates, and wide segments of the electorate have grown passive, even apathetic. Acting in the name of a supposedly homogeneous Hungarian people, Fidesz’s populism mobilizes and de-politicizes in practically equal measure. This de-politicization strategy was also greatly aided by the exit of hundreds of thousands of well-educated younger people: the openness of the European space has paradoxically contributed to the consolidation of power of the Orbán regime.

A demonstrator against the Gyurcsány government, 15 March 2007. Source: Flickr

Populist ideas – such as the notion that the subject of politics is a homogeneous and exclusive Hungarian people whose general will is represented by their current leaders and only their current leaders – are central to the dominant political discourse. The consequence of this way of doing politics has been a soft form of authoritarianism. Now, soft authoritarianism is nothing new in modern Hungarian history; however, an illiberal state within the European Union can be qualified as a novel and poorly understood phenomenon.

Let us briefly look at both of these aspects, the historical and the contemporary European, to clarify what is so worrisome about the current situation. Whether under Miklós Horthy in the 1920s, János Kádár in the 1970s or Viktor Orbán now, Hungarian political life has repeated produced a strange amalgam: a form of largely authoritarian rule which seems to preserve a modicum of liberalism and cherishes a semblance of freedom.

In earlier decades, the political culture of Hungary could combine, without apparent contradiction, a radical rightist ideology with pragmatic forms of conservatism, as under Horthy, or the structures of a totalitarian regime without the most conspicuous and terrible forms of totalitarian rule, as during the later decades of Kádár’s reign. Fidesz has also introduced a special amalgam: one-party rule within what looks like a multi-party system, competitive elections which are not fair, a pluralistic media landscape whose dominant part is nonetheless under direct government control, recurrent vicious open threats which are often followed by even more scandalous crackdowns and – last but not least – an illiberal regime heavily dependent on being part of a union of liberal democracies.

Having said that, the most conspicuous and worrisome political development of recent years has been the almost complete convergence of Fidesz and its radical right-wing opposition represented by Jobbik. Polls of political attitudes showed years ago that Fidesz voters are as likely to display authoritarian attitudes as those of Jobbik. This was to be partly explained by the fact that their own party was ruling in an authoritarian manner and they were repeatedly asked to endorse that, whereas some Jobbik voters see themselves as non-conformist rebels or even as – hard to credit though this may be – freedom fighters (and may therefore be qualified as anti-authoritarian authoritarians).

What may be more surprising, and more worrying, is that levels of xenophobia have grown massively in society – this is one area where a largely passive and immobile
electorate has become complicit with the anti-migrant mobilization of the power-holders – and its level among Fidesz voters has reached that seen among Jobbik voters. Both these aspects show that it makes no sense to insist on the distinction between a centre-right government and its radical-right challengers.

On the European level, a strategy of two steps forward, one step back has characterized Fidesz’s approach. They seem to employ a cautious strategy of escalation, which functions by deception and does so remarkably well: while Orbán presents himself as a radical who challenges the immobility of European institutions and the unpopular status quo, he also looks like a politician ready to debate and compromise. It is indeed conspicuous how much more ready Orbán is to debate on the European level than within his ‘own’ member state (where he typically prefers to remain above the fray).

Discrepancies remain between a rhetorically Eurosceptic government, which puts strong emphasis on ‘defence’ – in fact the enlargement of spheres of national sovereignty; and a largely pro-European though not liberal democratically-minded society. However, what might be politically more important is that Fidesz has not suffered significantly on the European level. The party remains a controversial but generally valued member of the European People’s Party. Despite his higher concentration of power, Orbán does not have to fear the earnest European-level scrutiny that the reigning Polish government has come to face due to its breaches of the rule of law.

The value systems of Merkel and Orbán might be worlds apart on some key issues, but on many more ordinary matters they have preserved their pragmatic alliance. Orbán might have proved to be the first far-right leader within the EU, but – notwithstanding the clear and profound deterioration of democratic standards in the country, recurrent strongly worded press reactions and the drastic decline in Hungary’s reputation – this has not resulted in his isolation. He is in fact an increasingly visible leader whose views and proposals may be questioned but are often taken seriously.

With the structural preconditions for a thorough and critical examination of the country being absent on the European level, and with any international political will to increase the pressure on Hungary now much reduced with Donald Trump in power in the States, can we discern any hopeful signs on the horizon?

Members of the cultural elite typically remain opposed to the direction the country has taken and some of them (János Kornai, Andrea Pető, András Bozóki, Ágnes Gagyi, to name just a few critics with alternative perspectives) have provided insightful political critiques. On the negative side, with universities egregiously underfunded, Hungarian intellectuals are often short on resources as well as international opportunities, and have also been largely deprived of access to more mainstream media in their own country.

Fidesz has not been particularly popular for years (the approval rates of the government, for instance, are far from impressive), but even so it has been able to maintain its solid lead amidst a rather meagre range of alternatives. Based on the number of voters without a clear party preference who are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, a novel and credible centrist or left-liberal party might have quickly emerged as a serious contender at the elections in early April. However, the chances that such an open contest will actually materialize are now slim indeed.