What happened in Hungary

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Viktor Orbán has won a third successive landslide victory in Hungary. A refashioned electoral system helped him return to power, but a fragmented and incompetent opposition has paved his way for over eight years now, argues Réka Kinga Papp.

The Hungarian election on 8 April saw an exceptionally high voter turnout, which at one point seemed to augur well for the opposition. Over 68 percent of voters cast a ballot, but in the event Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party won an even more emphatic victory than in 2014: its share of the vote rose to over 48 percent and its two-thirds majority in parliament was entrenched.

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One reason for this clean sweep is that the electoral system was refashioned and gerrymandered in the governing party’s favour as long ago as 2011, after Fidesz first came into power with a two-thirds majority. Most house seats are elected on a first-past-the-post basis, which means one can win a seat with less than half the votes if the opposition is fragmented. And it is: Fidesz won 91 out of the 106 such seats.

Furthermore, ever since he unexpectedly lost a general election in 2002, at the end of his first term as prime minister, Orbán planned assiduously to avoid a repeat. When opportunity called again in 2010, his party made sure to limit by administrative means any chance that it would lose again.

Orbán’s ongoing success is down to the incompetent and chaotic opposition in more ways than one. The then governments of the socialist MSZP (2002-2010) produced a series of scandals and collapses during their time in office, which despite the party’s name was strictly neoliberal in character, and even managed to impeach two of their own prime
ministers. One of those, Ferenc Gyurcsány is still in politics, now serving as little more than a bogeyman for the rightwing voters of Hungary. Orbán took power in 2010 without any relevant opponents: the socialists were in self-induced meltdown, while other opposition actors were still emerging. Fidesz made good use of the vacuum and proceeded to take over all branches of government in one way or another. Their supermajority allowed them to entirely replace the constitution with a text on which they consulted with no one, and amend it in any way they saw fit. They replaced the entire Labour Code and the Penal Code, and proceeded amend their own ‘basic’ texts without hesitation. For example when the Constitutional Court ruled that the criminalization of homelessness was unconstitutional, they criminalized it via the Constitution. [1]

Fidesz has systematically weakened – and sometimes abolished – democratic checks and balances, built up huge influence over the judiciary and taken over much of the media. Government-friendly owners now possess 59 per cent of the entire Hungarian media [2], much of which they bought from the state with subsidized loans, and which the state continues to fund via public advertising. National state television broadcasts a mix of propaganda, fear-mongering and falsehoods, as do a number of commercial channels, including Hungarian-American Hollywood producer Andy Vajna’s TV2, which even produced a video [3] in which its anchors pledged their votes to Orbán. 65 percent of national dailies are owned by government-friendly businessmen, as are all the rural dailies.

Orbán is everywhere.

**Return of the tinfoil hat**

The only party to actually challenge Fidesz’s dominance was the far-right party Jobbik party, which has had an enormous impact on what Fidesz now stands for. Thirty years ago the founders of Fidesz declared themselves young democrats, liberals who wanted to establish an occidental turn in Hungarian politics. Within ten years they had re-branded themselves as bürgerlich conservatives and conducted their first term in government between 1998 and 2002 in neoconservative fashion. When they came back to power after 2010 they pursued a similar approach – until Jobbik started to gain popularity based on its social demagoguery and grassroots presence in small municipalities. Jobbik’s original platform was based on racism towards Hungarian Roma, which they extended in a now-classical alt-right, anti-globalisation direction. By the 2014 elections, Jobbik had already started to tone down its most explicit far-right policies and taken a more general rightwing populist direction. Orbán’s Fidesz, after winning in 2014, took an unexpected turn by seeking to dominate rightwing space.

This lurch was characterized by direct attacks on Fidesz’s extraparliamentary opposition, the independent media, and hate campaigns clearly based on imported American models. A government organized internet troll army was used [4] in the election race and a spin doctor of Orbán’s seems also to have worked with [5] the now infamous Cambridge Analytica. Alarming similarities to Benjamin Netanyahu’s rhetoric and US Republican tactics are the result of the involvement of a common spin doctor. The recently deceased Arthur J. Finkelstein was a master of negative campaigning, or as he called it, objectionist voting; he established the negative connotation of the word ‘liberal’ in the US, among
others. His approach was well received by Fidesz, who won this month’s election by campaigning against Middle Eastern asylum seekers and the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros, whose funds provide a last shelter for much of the remaining independent civic sphere of Hungary.

These campaigns are based on obvious lies and even represent the duality of 1930s anti-Semitic propaganda: the threatening proximity of people of a different religion and culture, this time Muslims - exploiting a cultural fear deeply embedded in the eastern and central European historical narrative; and on the other side, the stereotypical figure of a wealthy and influential imaginary supervillain, who also happens to evoke classic anti-Semitism thanks to his heritage and values. But this twofold hate propaganda is rooted deeper than just accidental public sentiment. Orbán has a real need to go after independent NGOs and media.

**In need of enemies**

Orbán has named his reign the Regime of National Cooperation. This expression well defines the expectations towards anyone who wishes to survive in this environment: either you collaborate or you are declared an enemy of the state. In the heat of the election race, government officials went as far as to describe individual activists and artists as threats to national security. Fidesz remodelled state NGO funding as early as 2010, right after it came to power, and named one of its chief supporters head of the so-called National Cooperation Funds.

Watchdog organizations soon lost any state funding, and many others with less controversial profiles followed. Initiatives essential to amend the often failing education and social systems, expertise and complementary service providers for handicapped care, Roma integration, and many others, found themselves excluded, with just two major sources of funds remaining: the independently administered civic portion of the EEA and Norway Grants and Soros’ Open Society Foundations.

One of Orbán’s key ministers, János Lázár, led the government attacks on the EEA Grants NGO Programme and its grantees from 2014, a nationwide smear campaign plus outrages including police raids on NGO offices. Even though the organizations in question were all cleared later of the charges they had been accused of, the government never apologized or compensated them, instead turning their fire on the other major funder, Soros’ Open Society Foundations.

In the spring of 2017 a modification to higher education law, popularly dubbed the lex CEU, was imposed with the clear intent of disabling the operations of Central European University (CEU), the highest-ranking university in Hungary, which happens to have been founded by George Soros and is also viewed as his key legacy. In the summer, NGOs who receive a certain portion of foreign funding were declared foreign agents and had to register as such. Fidesz spokesman Zoltán Kovács declared right after the election results that the government was imposing a legislative package that it dubbed ‘Stop Soros’, thus allowing the further persecution of dissenting groups. The resulting pieces of legislation are exact analogues of Vladimir Putin’s attacks on the civic sphere.

In the independent media what Fidesz and its outskirts did not buy they set out to
 destroy. The editor-in-chief of the most-read news portal, Origo, was fired immediately after it published investigative articles about minister János Lázár’s shady travels in 2014; the majority of the portal’s staff then followed. [9] Origo was sold soon after and now serves as a full-blown propaganda site. [10] The highest selling daily Népszabadság was shut down [11] some days after it reported on a luxurious helicopter flight by propaganda minister Antal Rogán. Employees received notification of their suspension on a Saturday morning, without any prior warning; the newspaper’s archives were deleted from the internet. The remaining independent media are the targets of smear campaigns, encounter ongoing problems financing their work, and are generally boycotted by government officials and public advertising.

Despite widespread international resistance, mass protests and the European Union’s displeasure at these measures, the attacks have had a devastating impact. CEU seems to be planning for its eviction from Hungary, and a large number of organizations have already given up their activities or operations completely. The free press is struggling to stabilize itself, but remains essential as a counterpoint to the government, given the political opposition’s clear dysfunction.

A fragmented opposition

Hungary’s opposition has some interesting players, and a lot of infighting. Along with two green parties, there is a new-wave hipster conservative party, Momentum [12], which first appeared with a referendum initiative against Viktor Orbán’s dream project to host the Olympic Games in 2017. It scored less than 3 per cent in the 8 April election, meaning some state funding but no seats.

The satirical Two-Tailed Dog Party [13] caused quite a sensation, voicing strong critical opinions via parody parades and publications. It got 1.7 per cent of the vote; it plans to give away its state campaign funding.

The alt-right Jobbik is older: it started as a movement in 1999 and launched as a party in 2003. Its racist and often anti-Semitic agenda has long defined it, but it took a more mainstream path after making it into Parliament in 2010. As a country with a history of fascism, Nazism and a prominent role in the Holocaust, Hungary has long been divided about Jobbik. But in the light of the current electoral system, which forces the opposition to coordinate to succeed, many decided they had to deal [14] ‘even with the Devil himself’. Jobbik, however, did not take part in the tactical coordination that other opposition parties initiated, despite extra-parliamentary groups begging them to. They came in second, with just short of 20 percent of the vote; leader Gábor Vona resigned [15] on the spot (he had told supporters Jobbik would win). A new leadership could bring Jobbik back to its extremist roots, leaving Hungary with two far-right parties controlling over 68 percent of the vote.

The greatest tricksters in the field are the heirs to the Soviet-era Communist Party, the socialist MSZP and its clearly neoliberal sibling the Democratic Coalition (DK), founded by ex-premier Ferenc Gyurcsány following his ejection from the MSZP. They both bear the marks of their leaderships’ involvement in former governments (1994-1998, then 2002-2010) and also the original sin of the communist past. But the Hungarian public seems to be somewhat forgiving about the past, since multiple Fidesz party officials are
also known to have held positions in the communist era.

**A false dawn**

Only seven weeks before the national vote, a local by-election [16] raised opposition hopes. The home town and political stronghold of key minister János Lázár elected an independent mayor into office against all expectations. The winning candidate himself, Péter Márki-Zay, said in an interview: ‘Had János Lázár nominated his horse, it would be elected’. Márki-Zay was supported by multiple opposition parties from both sides and won a surprise victory, thus becoming a symbol of hope and giving some – but not enough, as it turned out – momentum to pre-election coordination negotiations. Opinion polls did not foresee his victory and survey experts became quite suspicious of the growing number of ‘no-answers’ from correspondents.

When it came to election day, however, opposition coordination at a national level crumbled and Fidesz reaped the rewards.

**It’s come to this**

Perhaps the most effective opposition to Orbán is now, ironically, one of his former cronies: Fidesz founding member, former party treasurer and long-time and Orbán confidant Lajos Simicska. The two fell out after Orbán began to feel threatened by the massive power his former college dorm-mate had amassed: Simicska had become owner of a major commercial news TV station, multiple radio stations, newspapers, and controlled a huge share of the outdoor advertising market, which which made him central to Fidesz’s propaganda efforts. He also happened to be a major builder as the owner of Közgép, a construction company that attracted huge government contracts.

The relationship came to a dramatic end when the government wanted to impose a special tax on advertising income. Simicska called Orbán a ‘jerk’ [17] on record and declared he was going to fire the leadership of his media outlets and turn the tide against Orbán. And so he did. The outlets, which used to serve as Fidesz’s mouthpiece were reorganized and took up a clear and hard opposition agenda. So much so that HírTV and the daily *Magyar Nemzet* launched a series of strikes on Fidesz officials right before the election. Some of the revelations date back to the days when Simicska was still a trusted member of Orbán’s empire, like the story [18] of the deputy prime minister’s odd hunting trips financed by a state subsidized businessman; the scandal of a Fidesz minister’s 4.3-billion euro fortune, supposedly handed to him by a suspicious heiress; and reports that while the government was running propaganda against Middle Easterners, Hungary had granted a golden visa [19] to Syrian dictator Assad’s money man and other suspects.

But what effect have these stories and others had? They heightened the mobilisation of opposition voters, perhaps – but not enough to shake Fidesz’s grip on power. Simicska’s role has been taken by a village mayor, a former gas-fitter who is handed billions in contracts [20] and is colloquially referred to as Orbán’s money man.

Just two days after the election, it emerged that two independent media outlets owned Simicska, the *Magyar Nemzet* daily and Lánchíd Rádió, would close on 10 April. Economic factors were cited [21] as the reason.
The Fidesz empire took some blows in this latest battle. The question is whether it will be able to isolate the damage and recover - or if Orbán is now vulnerable to a challenger. If so, another question arises: from where will that challenger emerge?

Note: This article was updated on 10 April to include news of the impending closure of the Magyar Nemzet daily and Lánchíd Rádió.

Footnotes


5. See: [https://medium.com/tett/minden-jel-arra-mutat-hogy-habony-is-a-cambridge-analyticaval-dolgozik-8c705c71dcf5](https://medium.com/tett/minden-jel-arra-mutat-hogy-habony-is-a-cambridge-analyticaval-dolgozik-8c705c71dcf5)


7. See: [https://budapestbeacon.com/fidesz-kdnp-passes-lex-ceu/?sf_s=lex+ceu&sf_paged=6](https://budapestbeacon.com/fidesz-kdnp-passes-lex-ceu/?sf_s=lex+ceu&sf_paged=6)


9. See: [https://444.hu/2014/06/05/deutsche-telekom-hungarian-government-collude-to-silence-independent-media](https://444.hu/2014/06/05/deutsche-telekom-hungarian-government-collude-to-silence-independent-media)

10. See: [https://bbj.hu/business/chief-photo-editor-leaves-origo-accusing-it-of-manipulation_131729](https://bbj.hu/business/chief-photo-editor-leaves-origo-accusing-it-of-manipulation_131729)


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