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Covid-19 pandemic in Hungary

Viktor Orbán is Using the Coronavirus Emergency to Crush Minorities

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV543 - April 2020 -

Publication date: Friday 24 April 2020

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In the last week of March, the Hungarian government gender reassignment, legislated jail terms for fake news, and put government stooges in control of theaters. Viktor Orbán's administration has done all this in the name of the response to coronavirus — exploiting its emergency powers to silence dissent and demonize minorities.

In a mid-morning session on March 30, Viktor Orbán read aloud in the wood-paneled hall of the upper house. [\[1\]](#) With its high neo-gothic arches, this grandiose venue is a remnant of the Hungarian parliament's time as a bicameral legislature, before World War II. In today's supposed unicameral democracy, this space is mainly used for ceremonial purposes or for tourist visits. But today the extra room is needed for social distancing — allowing MPs to sit two seats apart from each other.

Some parliamentarians had white masks strung across their faces — and the matter at hand was at least supposed to do with coronavirus. [\[2\]](#) Standing at the center of the hall wearing a stiff, wide-cut black suit, Orbán calmly read out the introduction to an act that would grant him emergency powers for an indefinite period. MPs duly voted through the “Coronavirus Bill” — a document with no expiration date, allowing the de facto autocrat to rule by decree.

There was no doubt the bill would pass — Orbán's Fidesz party already controls some two-thirds of seats in parliament. [\[Jacobin 16 April 2018 “Fidesz's Two-Thirds”.\]](#) But the measures allow Orbán to bypass the national assembly entirely, while promising two-to-five-year jail sentences for anyone who “distorts facts” or publishes “false information.”

“You want to approve this law,” opposition lawmaker Tímea Szabó told Parliament, “which practically authorizes you to govern without any meaningful control. And it gives you a free hand to do away with even what's left of the press and practically imprison journalists, doctors, and opposition lawmakers if we say things that you don't like — namely, the truth.”

It's understandable that some emergency measures must be taken during a pandemic. Parliaments across the globe have granted governments powers unseen since World War II, in the effort to curb the spread of the virus and safeguard human lives. But no democracy has granted the head of government complete authority with no defined time limit. And Orbán has form.

In the past he single-handedly crafted a new constitution, systematically eroded the system of checks and balances, introduced a new electoral system favoring his party, and gerrymandered electoral districts to maintain his stronghold. He has intimidated his critics in cultural and academic spheres and established a near-complete control over the country's media landscape using public funds — to name just a few of his actions.

The fear, then, was that Orbán's kleptocratic regime would use the state of emergency to extend its powers, far beyond the response to COVID-19. And the steps taken since March 30 show it's doing that already.

Attacking Press Freedom

The ballooning of government powers is most strikingly visible in the jail terms promised for those convicted of

“spreading falsehoods” related to COVID-19. This is supposedly needed to prevent misinformation that could pose a potentially lethal threat to human health. Not explained is why the existing legal framework for the dissemination of misleading information was insufficient.

Given Orbán and Fidesz’s history of silencing journalists, we can expect a rather selective enforcement of the law. On the pro-government Hir TV, Gábor Megajda — a leading researcher at Orbán’s pet think tank Századvég — said, with reference to independent journalists critical of the government’s response to the pandemic: “I would suggest their arrest in a crisis like this.” This was, of course, “only a joke.”

In truth, Orbán’s government has itself spread much of the misinformation around the virus. Gergely Gulyás, minister for the prime minister’s office, claimed that people under the age of sixty-five can catch coronavirus without risk to their long-term health, and that the virus leads to no fatalities for healthy people under the age of fifty. Both claims are falsehoods likely to obstruct the fight against the pandemic.

Yet the fear is that this legislation will be used to silence those with legitimate criticism of the government’s handling of the situation. And grounds for criticism there surely are. While Hungary introduced social-distancing measures relatively early, the number of tests performed is low compared to other EU countries. Underpaid health care workers moreover often lack the personal protective equipment — such as masks and gloves — required to reduce their risk of infection.

Smokescreen of Emergency

The pandemic found Hungary’s health care system in shambles, following decades of systematic underfunding. Such neglect has coincided with escalating government investment in pet projects like a football stadium in Orbán’s home village, boosted by corporate tax credits. Yet there is little sign that the government is turning to focus on the health situation alone.

Indeed, since the Coronavirus Act was passed Orbán has already begun to push through further regressive changes on a range of fronts. On March 31 his deputy prime minister Zsolt Semjén introduced a law containing fifty-seven legislative changes — what Hungarians call a “salad bill,” throwing together entirely unrelated measures, all under the pretext of coronavirus response.

Typical of this is the fact that the bill will expand Fidesz’s control over the arts — and, more specifically, theatrical productions, perhaps not the most likely terrain for a response to coronavirus. The government has long waged a war against “liberal cultural hegemony,” meant to attack artistic independence and Hungarian counterculture. The legislation will pack the theater supervisory board with government appointees — expanding this censorship.

The bill is also used for blatant monetary gain. It will force through one of Orbán’s own favored projects: the construction of new museum buildings in one of the capital’s biggest public parks. Budapest’s mayor Gergely Karácsony had tried to halt this, as it takes away much-needed green space from the residents of Budapest. But the bill also provides cover for the premier’s shadier dealings. Documents related to the delivery of the construction of a new Budapest-Belgrade railway — a megaproject in which Orbán’s cronies are believed to have significant interest — are moreover to be classified for ten years.

Semjén’s package initially also included the suspension of municipal autonomy — meaning that local governments would no longer have any independent power. However, faced with the outcry from the opposition — who made

significant gains in the last municipal contests in fall 2019, including Karácsony's election in Budapest— this measure was reversed. Gergely Gulyás justified this zigzag by saying that the “government aims at unity irrespective of party affiliation and thus will refrain from enacting this change.” This is a quite typical move from a government that is notorious for what Orbán himself called a “peacock dance” — backing away from some of the most controversial aspects of a proposed change while still keeping some aspects of it in order to parade a “sensible willingness to compromise.”

Semjen is not a member of Orbán's Fidesz but of one of its allies, the ultraconservative Christian Democratic People's Party. And notable in this regard was the fact that his package of legislation also introduced a bill attacking trans rights. The measure, introduced on March 31 — the International Day of Transgender Visibility —forces trans people to have the same gender as they were assigned at birth and bans gender reassignment altogether.

After the pandemic is over, Orbán may or may not give back the powers entrusted in him. But what seems certain is that many of these regressive changes introduced in the meantime are here to stay.

The World Health Organization has already provided detailed, data-based instructions for governments to follow in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 throughout their populations. Its key pillars include widespread and readily available testing; providing medical workers with personal protective equipment; and clear directives to the public about the importance of proper social distancing. There is no research to suggest that rampant censorship of the arts, robbing trans people of their rights, taking power away from local governments, or funding cronyistic construction projects will in any way help hold back the spread of COVID-19.

“The Dogs Bark, the Caravan Carries On”

The bill has sparked vocal dissent from sections of the Hungarian opposition as well as some international media. Over 100,000 Hungarians protested the Coronavirus Act in an online demonstration, and the European Commission has stated that it is “investigating the new law” and will debate its validity this week. [3] The European People's Party (EPP) — the powerful alliance of European conservative parties — has once again floated the proposition of expelling the already-suspended Fidesz from its ranks. [4] In recent years, the EPP has refrained from such a move even faced with the intentional deployment of starvation tactics against asylum seekers in Hungarian detention facilities, or indeed the de facto expulsion of the Central European University from the country. Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto, a member of Fidesz, dismissed critics — remarking “the dogs bark, the caravan carries on.”

But if Orbán's moves have sparked upset even among conservatives abroad, does this mean he is turning to outright dictatorship? The passage of the Coronavirus Bill is cause for deep concern given Orbán and Fidesz's proclivity for dismantling democratic institutions. But some reactions to the bill have been alarmist and premature. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe — a liberal-centrist group within the European Parliament — called the bill's passage the rise of a “corona dictatorship”, while some German press have translated the legislation's title as “Ermächtigungsgesetz” or “Enabling Act” — invoking the similarly-named act that granted Adolf Hitler total power after the Reichstag fire of 1933. [5] In the United States, a Washington Post article claims that Hungary is the first democracy to be killed by the coronavirus. And Hungarian social media is swarming with memes and videos comparing Orbán's move to Palpatine's rise to the throne in Star Wars.

The rise of Fidesz clearly has pushed Hungary towards authoritarianism and an abandonment of democratic processes. [6] Yet despite its dominance of state institutions and even its packing of the Constitutional Court, this is not, for now, an outright dictatorship. Political scientists have described Hungary as a “competitive authoritarian system” or a “ballot-box dictatorship” — meaning a system in which elections have real significance but are also

significantly rigged through the dissemination of partisan propaganda and misinformation, by the state-run public broadcaster as by privatized ones “donated” to a holdings company in fall 2018. [7] Others have described Hungary as a hybrid regime, stuck between dictatorship and democracy. Some even call it an “externally constrained hybrid-regime” — assuming (rather optimistically) that the European Union somehow acts as a constraint on Orbán’s actions. [8]

Thus far, Orbán has mostly ruled with the “velvet fist” — a strategy based on media manipulation, the bending of institutional rules, corruption, gerrymandering, and the skillful art of crafting laws that are designed to destroy perceived opponents such as universities and NGOs. [9] While there is self-censorship in the media, which will likely worsen as a result of the emergency bill, Putin-esque tactics such as locking up or otherwise physically threatening journalists have thus far been absent from Fidesz’s playbook. There is currently no way of knowing if or when Hungary’s competitive authoritarian system will drift into open dictatorship — and if Orbán will at some point start to “rule by the iron fist.”

The measures taken since the passing of the Coronavirus Act are alarming — and could mark a slide into more dictatorial territory. Yet at the same time, the staging of emergency and authoritarian-power grab may itself be a public relations move designed to defame the opposition politically, making it seem as if their opposition is obstructing efforts to fight the pandemic itself. The best way to confront the political plague of post-fascism is thus similar to how we should be confronting the COVID-19 pandemic itself: stay calm, but be vigilant.

Social Sadism

Indeed, one of the unfortunate consequences of even justified concerns about the bill is that it diverts public attention away from something else Orbán is doing. For amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, he has pursued a ruthless top-down class war against the lower strata of Hungarian society in the interest of the wealthy, and to some extent the upper echelons of the middle class. This is similar to the “shock politics” described by author and activist Naomi Klein — and today highly visible in US politics. Donald Trump and his administration deploy “rolling shocks” to freeze the public and the opposition into a state of panic, and thereby push through their own agenda.

This ought not blind us to Orbán’s social agenda. Faced with the recession sure to result from the pandemic, he has focused relief on upper- and upper-middle-class portions of Hungarian society — while ignoring the rest. In particular, his economic plan has centered on helping businesses, with the bulk of the support individuals receive provided in the form of tax credits. It is, of course, hard to benefit from such relief if you do not have any income in the first place. Equally, while mortgage payments and some other liabilities have been suspended, rent is still due. Compared to other EU countries, Hungary is thus an outlier in a second sense — for it is hardly providing any financial assistance to workers affected by the crisis.

A commentator from leftist news website Merce.hu described Orbán’s reluctance to suspend debt collection as “social sadism”; the European Trade Union Congress sent a letter to the prime minister to protest his abandonment of working-class Hungarians at their time of need. [10] It is not yet clear how this aspect of the crisis will play out. But the signs are that the government will remain extremely generous when it comes to bailing out a crony capitalist class that it has itself enriched — a key pillar of Orbán’s so-called “system of national cooperation.”

Schmitt Disciple

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In his *Political Theology* the Nazi jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt pointed out the failings of even the most seemingly sophisticated liberal norms — liberal constitutions he sought to undermine. In exceptional circumstances, he insisted, somebody will decide on “the state of exception” and suspend the norms previously in place. Schmitt claims that sovereignty lies where that decision on the exception can be made. In *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt further defined a political act as a sovereign act that differentiates friends from potentially mortal enemies.

Orbán has put Schmittian theory into practice in two ways. First, he used the pandemic to decide on the state of exception — thus reaffirming his own sovereign rule. Second, he declared that we are “at war” with COVID-19: claiming that the opposition must be on the side of the virus, given that they are opposing his unchecked rule. He also attempted to carry on with his older friend-enemy distinction by linking the pandemic to migration, but this narrative proved too unconvincing.

As a young man Orbán aspired to be a political theorist, writing his undergraduate thesis on the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. [11] Faced with the exceptional opportunity offered by coronavirus, he has turned out to be an uncannily faithful disciple of the “Crown Jurist of the Third Reich.” Hungary is not yet a dictatorship, but the state of emergency is hastening the disappearance of liberal-democratic norms.

8 April 2020

Source [Jacobin](#).

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[1] *Jacobin* 24 April 2018 “[Viktor Orbán Versus the Enlightenment](#)”.

[2] *Jacobin* 14 March 2020 “[Mike Davis on Coronavirus: “In a Plague Year”](#)”.

[3] *Euronews* 31 March “[‘Absolutely unacceptable’: MEP says Hungary’s COVID-19 law means democracy has been suspended](#)”.

[4] *euobserver* 4 February 2020 “[“EPP kicks possible Fidesz expulsion further down line”](#)”.

[5] *Encyclopedia Britannica* blog “[The Reichstag Fire and the Enabling Act of March 23, 1933](#)”.

[6] *Jacobin* 24 July 2019 “[When Orbán Was a Liberal](#)”.

[7] *Washington Post* 10 May 2019 “[Trump and the march of ballot box autocrats](#)”, *New York Times* 29 November 2019 “[Orban and His Allies Cement Control of Hungary’s News Media](#)”.

[8] CEU Publications Registry 2019 “[An Externally Constrained Hybrid Regime: Hungary in the European Union](#)”.

[9] *New York Times* 25 May 2015 “[The New Dictators Rule by Velvet Fist](#)”.

[10] European Trade Union 1 April 2020 [Letter to President and Prime Minister Hungary](#).

[11] *Jacobin* 22 January 2020 ["Happy Birthday, Antonio Gramsci"](#).