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### Creeping Authoritarianism in the Name of Pandemic Response

*Agnes Batory*

Reflecting on the political consequences of the greatest public health emergency in living memory, analysts are divided on whether populist forces have benefitted from the COVID-19 pandemic. “Populists love the pandemic” (Sierakowski 2020), claims one; “the Covid bell tolls for Eastern Europe’s populists” (Rambousek 2021), observes another, to mention just two contrasting views. Clearly, the urgency of a pandemic situation offers excellent opportunities for enterprising populist leaders: it allows them to portray themselves as men of action and provides a pretext not just for simplifying the terms of the debate—as Moffitt and Tormey (2014) argue, generally a defining feature of the populist political style—but also for sidelining or negating the institutions designed for debate. On the other hand, for populists in government, a narrative, however convincing, is unlikely to be sufficient for long in a genuine crisis; eventually, they do have to deliver on their promises to maintain electoral support. And in this context, populism’s traditional anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, and distrust of the foreign all sit uneasily with the need for scientific expertise and international collaboration effectively to combat the disease.

How this tension played out in the case of Hungary is the subject of this chapter. Hungary is a particularly interesting and well-suited country case for such an endeavor, since it has been governed by the EU’s arguably most successful populist party for a decade. How has Fidesz and its long-time leader Viktor Orbán responded to the crisis, both in terms of political narratives and mobilization strategies and in terms of policies proposed and implemented? How did this crisis response evolve over time? Was the crisis response distinctly populist in nature? And how can we make sense of Fidesz’ political and policy response? These are the questions this chapter sets out to investigate.

However, first a few clarifications are in order. Populism is a fuzzy concept, but sidestepping the scholarly debate, the definition adopted here, in line with the book

as a whole, is the widely used ideational one by Mudde (2007, 23) as a “thin-centered ideology” that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people. Populists come in many forms; an important distinction is between exclusionary populism, typically found in Europe—Fidesz clearly belongs to this category—and inclusionary populism, mainly in Latin America (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). The former is exclusionary, in the sense that they base their appeal on “the exclusion of all those who are not natives” be they (Muslim) immigrants, the Roma, or others considered as aliens (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). European radical right (exclusionary, nativist) populists are also Euroskeptical to a smaller or greater degree as they tend to see the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008; Vasilopoulou 2018).

Three other topics from the vast literature on populism should at least be mentioned here, since they are particularly relevant for a discussion on the pandemic response. One is how the relationship between populism and crisis should be conceptualized. The most influential argument in the recent literature is that “the performance of crisis [is] an internal core feature of populism”; populists not only utilize but also trigger and perpetuate crises for partisan advantage (Moffitt 2015, 189). In fact, some scholars argue that a sense of crisis is essential for populism to survive (Taggart 2004).

A second and closely related issue is whether there is a type of crisis response that can be conceptualized as distinctively populist in nature. Moffitt (2015) argues that there is, and it is defined by the invocation of the “people,” pitted against those allegedly responsible for the crisis and the intention to perpetuate the crisis (see also Rennó and Ringe’s Introduction chapter in this volume). Finally, the impact of governmental role on populism is controversial in the literature. While there are good reasons to expect that populists lose their electoral appeal once they can no longer portray themselves to be outside the establishment (“the self-limiting quality of populism” [Taggart 2004]), evidence in Europe and elsewhere points to populist parties successfully reconciling the responsibilities of office with continuing populist appeal (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015).

Following this short introduction, the next section provides some background to the country case and traces how the pandemic and the crisis management measures unfolded. The “Analyzing the response” section links the response to a range of factors found to be relevant in the comparative literature (Rennó and Ringe’s Introductory chapter). Finally, a brief concluding section offers an outlook on how the pandemic’s effects might shape Hungarian politics in the future.

## The pandemic and the government’s crisis response

Hungary’s political history since the 1990 regime change has been turbulent. Initially a poster child of postcommunist democratic transition and integration into the EU, more recently it has featured in political science scholarship as a textbook

case of democratic backsliding, lost momentum in economic development, and often a stumbling block for various EU initiatives. In 2020, V-Dem classified Hungary as an electoral authoritarian regime, that is, the EU's only non-democracy (V-Dem Institute 2020). In the same year, Freedom House rated Hungary as partly free and classified it as a transitional or hybrid regime (Freedom House 2021).

In no small part, these negative tendencies can be traced back to Fidesz' landslide electoral victory in 2010. Following the global economic crisis, numerous corruption scandals, and constant in-fighting within its ranks, the Socialist Party lost power and splintered, leaving Fidesz with a qualified majority in parliament. Fidesz and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Fidesz leader since 1993) lost no time in consolidating their power by adopting a new constitution that considerably weakened checks and balances, redrawing the electoral system to favor its candidates, curbing the freedom of the press, and appointing party loyalists to lead all significant, supposedly independent institutions from the central bank to the state audit office. Fidesz-friendly economic interests also acquired control of large segments of the print and electronic media. Individuals close to the governing party or the prime minister personally amassed large fortunes through favorable public contracts (David-Barrett and Fazekas 2020). For instance, Orbán's childhood friend Lőrinc Mészáros, by training as a gas fitter, was the richest person in Hungary in 2021 (Forbes Hungary 2021).

Meanwhile, the center-left opposition remained fragmented and largely unable to cooperate with Jobbik, an erstwhile extreme right party that slowly re-fashioned itself as Fidesz' "mainstream" challenger on the right. For much of the decade after 2010, Fidesz led the polls by very large margins and won qualified majorities in parliament in the 2014 and 2018 elections, capitalizing in the latter case on the 2015 refugee crisis, when large numbers of refugees fleeing turbulence in the Middle East crossed the country on their way to Western Europe. However, for the first time since 2010, the opposition parties performed well in the fall 2019 municipal elections, securing the Budapest mayoral office and winning a number of county seats by fielding joint candidates, and thus discovered a way to challenge Orbán—just as the memory of the refugee crisis and with it the popular appeal of Orbán's xenophobic "anti-migrant" message began to wane. This was the scene when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe, presenting Fidesz with the opportunity, and the challenge, to take control of the agenda.

And indeed, already in January, sometime before the first case was detected in Hungary, Viktor Orbán switched to full crisis mode. The prime minister convened a task force, headed by the minister of the interior, to coordinate measures. The task force included the minister for health and the chief medical officer, one doctor, and the head of the national ambulance service, but other members were drawn from law and order fields—disaster relief, the police, counterterrorism, and the aliens police (because, as the prime minister said on 31 January 2020, "the virus comes from abroad").<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the first measures focused on border control and essentially aimed at screening people arriving from high infection countries, chiefly among them, by then, Italy.

The task force developed protocols largely following World Health Organization (WHO) and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) recommendations. The country ceased to admit asylum seekers into transit zones at the borders in February. The first cases were detected in early March, and after a few days' delay, the government closed first universities, then from mid-March also primary and secondary schools, and the borders. By the end of the month, all nonessential shops closed and a ban on all public events/gatherings was in place; the country essentially entered into strict lockdown. Military commanders or coordinators took charge of about half of the country's hospitals at the end of March, and in April, in anticipation of infections peaking during the month, the government ordered hospitals to free up 60% of total bed capacity, forcing them to discharge patients who would normally have needed hospital care. COVID-related hospitalization and fatality rates began to improve toward the end of April, and the lockdown measures were gradually lifted. By mid-June, the pandemic appeared to have subsided and life largely returned to normal.

With about 600 lives lost to the pandemic in a country of approximately ten million, Hungary weathered the first wave (March to May 2020) relatively well, essentially by implementing the standard policy measures other countries also introduced following WHO recommendations. One significant exception is the obligation to wear masks, which was introduced only in May and only with respect to closed public spaces (ECDC 2021a). Not surprisingly, Fidesz attributed "overcoming the first wave" to its own decisive and speedy crisis measures, made possible by the Authorization Act of March 30 that gave the government sweeping powers in all spheres of life and effectively introduced rule by decree. But Viktor Orbán also recognized the importance of "national unity/cooperation" and the "excellence of Hungary's medical professionals" in avoiding mass fatalities (April 29, 2020, radio interview).

However, the medical professionals themselves seemed less impressed with the government's actions. Initially, there was a persistent shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) in medical practices—the government countered with the claim that it was the general practitioners' own responsibility to secure PPE. The Hungarian Doctors' Chambers (2020) called on the task force to greatly step up testing (Hungary tested very little in comparison with other EU countries [ECDC 2021b]) and contact tracing (which remained rudimentary throughout the period and into the winter), require mask-wearing much more extensively, and monitor and enforce quarantine more strictly (checks were performed sporadically at best). Equally important, the doctors demanded more transparency and consultation instead of the missives issued by the task force: "the country's doctors are not soldiers and do not carry out orders" (Hungarian Doctors' Chambers 2020). The task force did not disclose (or perhaps did not have) infection data broken down by municipality, which made it very difficult for local governments—many led by opposition parties—to make or implement policy in an evidence-based manner in their own competencies.

From the summer months, the government's declared objective was to focus on restarting the economy. This meant essentially no significant lockdown measure, with some exceptions until November, which proved to be a grave mistake. After a summer of abandon, case notification and death rates started to pick up in early September and quickly surpassed the worst seen during the spring first wave. The government reacted, again, by banning the entry of foreigners to the country (with some exceptions), but put aside its own rule to allow thousands of football supporters to cross the border and attend the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Super Cup in Budapest at the end of September. Entertainment venues, shops, and schools remained open until November. Viktor Orbán justified this strategy by claiming first that "the people" wanted Hungary to stay open and work and second that the situation was different from the first wave: then, full lockdown was necessary to flatten the curve and prepare the country but "now [in September] we no longer have to worry that anybody would be left without adequate care, since the medical system is ready to treat mass infections" (September 21, 2020, radio interview).

By November, however, it became abundantly clear that at least the latter claim was on shaky grounds: medical professionals warned about a serious risk that the entire medical system would be overwhelmed by the rapidly rising number of cases. As a representative of the Doctors' Chamber said in early November, he believed soon doctors with COVID symptoms would be expected to go to work "simply because otherwise there will be no one to care for the patients" (Nyiri 2020). At this point, lockdown measures were finally introduced, alongside the obligation to wear a mask at all times in public places, even outdoors. But these measures seemed too little too late—for example, primary schools stayed open until March—and took time to have any effect: the second wave (October 2020 to January 2021) peaked in December, and an even worse third wave (March to May 2021) was to come, peaking in April 2021. In April and early May 2021, Hungary recorded the highest mortality numbers in the world, with 284 deaths per 100,000 (Johns Hopkins 2021). By the end of the third wave, almost 30,000 people had died of COVID-19 in Hungary—almost three times more than in similar-sized neighboring countries Austria or Slovakia and twice more than in Sweden, a country widely regarded to have mismanaged its crisis response (ECDC 2021c).

Not surprisingly, Orbán seemed less and less inclined to "own" the crisis as the situation got worse over time. Before the pandemic hit, he said that it was "the job of the government to defend the people against all dangers, including pandemics" (January 31, 2020). As already mentioned, he took credit for the relatively favorable outcome after the first wave—when, incidentally, most other postcommunist EU member states also did relatively well. But by December 2020, he clearly wanted to shift the blame for the rising death toll—for instance, to the European Commission for not being speedy enough with the procurement and rollout of COVID vaccines but, to some extent, also to his government's own task force, which was supposedly in charge of all operative decisions. "All

decisions about [Covid] defense are made by the task force. When, where, who we test is not a political decision, but a decision by the experts” (Hirklikk 2020).

Since the winter pandemic measures would have been difficult to present as a success, Orbán did his best to shift the attention to his government’s efforts to source vaccines internationally. Characteristically, this involved leaving behind (or aside) the existing joint EU effort to secure vaccines from Western pharma companies and involved ordering large quantities of the Sinopharm and Sputnik vaccines from China and Russia, respectively, neither of which was approved by the European Medicines Agency. However, thanks to the availability of especially the Chinese vaccine as well as, after some delay, the AstraZeneca and Pfizer–BioNTech vaccines distributed by the EU, initially vaccine rollout indeed proceeded faster in Hungary than many other European countries (although by the summer Hungary fell behind in comparison with other EU countries). The easing of pandemic measures was then timed to follow vaccination thresholds and, with five million people vaccinated in late May 2021, the pandemic was again declared to be defeated (Coronavirus Task Force 2021).

## Analyzing the response

The Orbán government’s response to the pandemic was distinctly populist in some respects. In line with Moffitt’s (2015) proposition, Orbán constantly invoked “the people” in his explanations of crisis measures—and in fact, often justified specific policy measures as responses that people want and rejected others as measures people would not endorse. For instance, he consistently claimed that in opening up and staying open in the fall, he was merely following the will of the people, expressed in a national consultation (a large-scale consultative exercise favored by the Orbán government [Batory and Svensson 2019]), which was “to keep the country going.” He justified keeping nurseries and primary schools open, as closing schools would “keep most people away from work, and the people don’t want this. When the majority of people want it, there will be a possibility for [closing schools]” (Orbán interview, TV2 Tenyek, November 11, 2020).

Also in line with Moffitt’s (2015) characterization of the typical populist crisis response, Orbán was quick to attribute responsibility for the pandemic to the “usual suspects”: migrants and international elites alleged to promote migration, notably US philanthropist investor George Soros and those claimed to be in his pay, including, at times, the EU institutions. A common theme in Orbán’s rhetoric during the pandemic was the supposed ineffectuality and alienation of the “bureaucrats in Brussels,” or just “Brussels,” from the daily problems his government faced and decisively tackled. As for perpetuating the crisis, another distinctive feature of populist crisis management (Moffitt 2015), Orbán was in a more difficult position. On the one hand, the pandemic created opportunities for blaming the opposition—for instance, Orbán claimed that the opposition parties aimed to create vaccine skepticism when they questioned his decision to roll out the Chinese vaccine without the European Medicines Agency (EMA)

approval—or the EU, for instance, when the promised vaccine distribution got delayed.

On the other hand, as a party of government, Fidesz desperately needed to bring the pandemic under control. Indeed, Fidesz' governmental role is a key explanatory factor for its endorsement of most of the “standard” pandemic control measures, including the introduction of lockdowns, distancing, stay at home orders, and the like. These measures were introduced relatively swiftly in the first wave (spring 2020), and eventually also in the second and third waves (winter 2020 and spring 2021), and then after a long delay, which was however more likely caused by a mistaken choice to keep the economy going than a principled opposition to the measures themselves. Given the need, for a party in government to “beat the virus,” Fidesz also did not engage in vaccine skepticism, nor was it in a position to mobilize against the lockdown or other control measures. On the contrary, Orbán very strongly promoted the vaccination campaign, urging everyone to register for the vaccine and when availability was no longer a problem, people were allowed to choose which vaccine to receive.

It is also likely that the reason for not following some of the other WHO recommendations, notably contact tracing, was not so much reluctance to fall in line as low state/administrative capacity and poor coordination among government agencies. The situation is somewhat different with testing: local political analysts commonly assumed that the reason for not investing in the expansion of testing capacity was the government's intention to hide the rate of infection. Reluctance to disclose the true gravity of the situation was also detectable in the government's handling of the press: the daily COVID press conference was moved online and inquiries from independent news outlets were regularly ignored (Végh 2021).

Overall, the strong impact of governmental responsibility on Fidesz' handling of the crisis is clear. A number of institutional features may have further reinforced this. Hungary is a parliamentary system, where any internally disciplined party holding a stable majority will control the government. In the case of Fidesz, the party held a supermajority in the National Assembly since 2010, allowing it to single-handedly change even laws of constitutional standing; moreover, the party was highly centralized and dominated by its long-standing leader, Viktor Orbán. The crisis, however, provided an opportunity for the ruling party to tighten its grip on power even more. Emergency legislation passed at the end of March gave the government the power to rule by decree. The so-called Authorization Act had no sunset clause and no mechanism of regular scrutiny, which many saw as particularly worrisome. These concerns were quickly proven well founded, in that the government adopted decrees on a wide range of matters that had little relevance for combating the pandemic but further weakened civil rights and liberties, for instance, in terms of granting access to citizens' personal data while limiting open access to public information (Végh 2021). The Authorization Act was eventually revoked by the Fidesz-controlled parliament in June, but only in conjunction with amendments to the regulation of exceptional legal

orders, and the state of emergency morphed into a “state of medical emergency,” with no significant impairment of executive power in practice (Eötvös Károly Institute 2020; Végh 2021).

All this suggests that the prime minister was in a uniquely strong position to make policy, but also that his responsibility for policy outcomes was difficult to obfuscate. Thus, not surprisingly, public confidence in the government’s handling of the crisis eroded over time. While, in March 2020, 75% of respondents were satisfied with the government’s pandemic response and only 24% was dissatisfied, by March 2021 only 45% was satisfied and the majority (53%) dissatisfied (Publicus polls for *Nepszava*, March 2020, 2021). However, these evaluations were strongly influenced by partisanship: although Fidesz supporters were also somewhat less impressed with how the government handled the crisis by the time the second wave hit, they maintained a strongly positive opinion (96% in March 2020 and 85% a year later). This contrasted sharply with the opposition parties’ supporters, only 13% of whom thought in March 2021 that the government had handled the crisis well (Publicus polls for *Nepszava*, March 2020, 2021).

## Conclusion and outlook

How these evaluations among the public evolve over time has great significance for the parties’ electoral prospects in the spring 2022 elections. As of May 2021, Fidesz maintained a huge lead over any single opposition party: 29% of respondents said they would vote for Fidesz, whereas the opposition parties all polled in the single digits. However, the largest single block of voters was undecided, and it seems that over the year of the pandemic, their numbers gradually decreased and many switched their allegiance to the opposition parties rather than to Fidesz (undecided: 40% in June 2020 and 31% in May 2021 [Publicus May 2021]). In the course of the pandemic, the opposition parties also intensified their efforts to overcome earlier divisions and formally agreed in December 2020 to jointly contest the 2022 elections to maximize their chances in the majoritarian electoral system that otherwise strongly favored the ruling party over a fragmented opposition.

At the time of writing, it is too early to tell which of the camps will win and thus there is no simple answer to the question if the pandemic benefitted or weakened Fidesz in purely partisan terms. Much will depend on whether another COVID wave hits in the fall and whether the economic consequences of the pandemic and lockdowns can be mitigated in time for the election campaign. It is, however, already clear that the pandemic’s most significant political consequence is to have reinforced and sped up the authoritarian drift of the Hungarian political system. Under the guise of the pandemic, Fidesz passed a great deal of legislation designed to weaken the opposition and strengthen the economic and/or political power of those close to Orbán and his party.

As to the pandemic response itself, while the government’s measures largely followed international practice in the first wave, later times they can be



characterized as an erratic mix which led to Hungary leading the mortality statistics globally during the spring 2021 spring wave. The response was distinctly populist in presenting the measures directly as the will of the people and in seeking to shift responsibility to actors outside the “nation”—be that the EU, migrants, or the opposition. However, being in office clearly limited the space for wanting to perpetuate the crisis; on the contrary, Fidesz’ electoral fortunes will depend on convincing the public that they successfully “beat the virus” without irreparable damage to the economy.

## Note

- 1 Viktor Orbán’s speeches are quoted from his official website, [miniszterelnok.hu](https://miniszterelnok.hu)

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