

The far right experience in Hungary

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In the recent Hungarian general election in April 2022, the ruling coalition, composed of Prime Minister Victor Orbán's Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party, won 50% of the vote. Another far-right, neo-Nazi party, the Our Homeland Movement, won 5%. What characterizes these parties and how did we get to this point?

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After the election, it embraced a liberal-conservatism which led liberal members to leave and join the Alliance of Free Democrats. It then sought to forge links with other conservative parties and, after the 1998 elections, managed to form a centre-right government. It embraced nationalism in the early 2000s, but its popularity declined slightly due to corruption scandals. It was in opposition between 2002 and 2010 and in 2006 formed a coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party, a coalition that has not been defeated since.

Then came the Ószöd speech made by Hungarian Socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány at the Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), in May 2006 in Balatonószöd. Although the congress was confidential, Gyurcsány's speech was leaked and broadcast by Magyar Rádió on 17 September 2006, triggering a nationwide political crisis. Deliberately using vulgar language, Gyurcsány criticized the MSZP for misleading the electorate and said his coalition government had not taken any significant steps during his tenure.

The Ószöd speech was followed by huge mass protests and restored Fidesz's popularity, leading to their winning a super-majority in the 2010 elections. After regaining power in Hungary, it adopted national-conservative policies and moved further to the right. It also became more critical of the European Union (EU), leading the party to be branded as Eurosceptic. In 2011, the new Hungarian constitution was adopted in parliament and entered into force in 2012, although it was the subject of controversy due to its consolidation of power in Fidesz. One clause in particular is very favourable to it: the bonus to the party (or coalition) with the most votes. Its majority of seats remained after the 2014 elections, and following the escalation of the migrant crisis, Fidesz began using right-wing populist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Since its inception, its political position has changed dramatically, with Orbán describing his model of government as an "illiberal Christian democracy".

Following the previous election held in 2018, it held the majority in the National Assembly with 117 seats, while it had obtained only a relative majority of 49% of the vote. It has also held the presidency since 2010 and enjoys majorities in all 19 county legislatures, while being in opposition

in the Budapest General Assembly. Fidesz was a member of the Liberal International until 2000, after which it joined the European People's Party. It remained a member until 2021, and since then he has sat in the non-attached group in the European Parliament.

Economic policy

Orban's main goal has been to establish a political system that allows for the accumulation of capital both externally and internally. On the one hand, in capital-intensive and export-oriented industries (such as manufacturing), this means providing a highly profitable business environment for multinational companies, for example by lowering corporation tax to 9% (the lowest in the EU), giving generous public funds to companies in exchange for "job creation", introduction of anti-worker legislation and so on. This explains the favour Orban enjoys among representatives of Western capital. In contrast, in the less capital-intensive and more domestically oriented sectors of the economy (banking, media, tourism, energy industry, agriculture, retail and so on), there has been a push to build a national capitalist class.

This last strategy of course requires a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the EU: taxes on foreign banks and energy multinationals, capture of European funds by Orban's friends putting European companies in tenders – and now increased economic ties with Russia and China, coupled with strong anti-EU rhetoric at home (for a decade, the EU has let Orban's friends and family seize EU funds with impunity, but has recently initiated proceedings for more transparency – China and Russia don't suffer from that kind of prudery!). However, the diversification of capital imports does not mean a loosening of relations with Western capital: Hungary, as a semi-peripheral country, remains extremely dependent on Western technology and capital. Collaboration with German car capitalist lobbies is part of this relationship – a story that journalists at Direkt36 (an investigative journalism site that aims to monitor those in power and expose their abuses, much like Mediapart in France) covered in detail in 2020.

Social policy

The desire to maintain the level of capital accumulation after the 2008 crisis, and in particular to support the management of the crisis by Western capital as well as that of local SMEs, forced the Fidesz government to suppress workers' rights. In this context, the government has completely emptied the institutions of tripartite social dialogue, adapted the Employment Code to the needs of employers, restricted the right to strike and so on. The "slave law" is part of this trend (in Austria, this law has been called the "BMW law", because according to anonymous sources, the German car manufacturer demanded this legal change in exchange for setting up a car manufacturing plant in the city of Debrecen). The decade-long anti-worker policies have sparked resentment among workers and unions: protests against the "slave law" and wage strikes that have erupted in various companies are clear signs of this.

However, the Hungarian trade union movement is not ready to retaliate in an organized manner. The unionization rate is low and has fallen over the years. Moreover, trade unions are mainly present in the public sector and in large multinational companies, representing the least precarious part of the Hungarian working class. After the protests against the "slave law", several unions reported a slight increase in their membership, but most people who join a union today face a stark and disappointing reality: the vast majority of Hungarian unions still retain the trade union culture of the years of so-called socialist statism: instead of grassroots organization, mass meetings and collective actions, the focus is mainly on lobbying employers and a partial redistribution of union

dues in the form of symbolic acts of well-being (gift cards for Christmas and so on). Over the past two years, signs of intensified unionization efforts have been observed in various sectors, but the Hungarian trade union movement is still far from being a major political force.

Populist measures

The main propaganda axis is support for “Hungarian families”: zero-interest mortgage for families (married, not couples!) who commit to having three children, work provided by town halls in rural areas, very badly paid but ensuring the survival of the poorest layers of the proletariat (especially the Roma) – many villages vote 100% Fidesz! – and, following the Ukrainian crisis, the freezing of the prices of sunflower oil and wheat flour, as well as petrol. At the same time, Orban has introduced a flat tax of 16% (while VAT is at 27%!), to ensure at least the neutrality of the wealthy layers.

The other axis is nationalism, based on nostalgia for greater Hungary (carved up by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920). For example, the Ukrainian refugees prioritised are those who come from Transcarpathia, a region of Ukraine that was part of greater Hungary and where Hungarian is still spoken.

Why Orban turned to the far right

Initially, Orban was an opponent of the Stalinist regime, liberal and pro-European. He even won the 2010 election against the Socialists by opposing drug franchises and the austerity plan. But his plan to develop Hungarian capitalism clashed with European rules of free competition. Even if they only concerned those sectors requiring the least capital and the least multinational concentration, such as services, it took capital and experience to win tenders. But the circle around him, family and friends, had no capital (the bureaucrats of the so-called socialist regimes have privileges but no capital).

It was therefore necessary to cheat, to rig the tenders, to discourage Western European companies and to hide all this from the Hungarian people. Hence the illiberalism and muzzling of the media. Hence campaigns whose main objective is to divert (criticism of Western banks and energy companies, anti-gay legislation and so on). Economically, this has led to a capture of European funds by Orban’s inner circle (with an over-invoicing of responses to calls for tenders of 25% according to the French Embassy).

Merkel’s Europe let it happen, because in exchange Orban guaranteed a cheap and docile workforce for multinationals, including Mercedes, Audi and BMW.

The “Our Homeland Movement”

“Our Homeland Movement” (in Hungarian Mi Hazánk Mozgalom) is a Hungarian far-right political party founded by Jobbik dissidents who left the organization after the party’s leadership moved away from its radical roots. In May 2019, it was announced that the party would form the National Legion, a uniformed “self-defence” group similar to Magyar Gárda, the paramilitary wing of the nationalist Jobbik party, which was banned in 2009. In the 2019 local elections, the party managed to win eight seats in the county assemblies.

The party strongly opposes LGBT rights. After the release of a children’s book, Meseország

mindenké, which features LGBT members and ethnic minorities as characters, the party's vice president, Dóra Dúró, called the book "homosexual propaganda" at a press conference and destroyed a copy by tearing up its pages and passing them through a shredder. This action caused significant controversy and attracted international attention.

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the party protested against the lockdown measures put in place by the government, accusing them of "inciting panic" and ruining the country. The party is also promoting vaccine hesitancy, launching a petition against the use of Covid vaccines on children aged 12 to 15. The party supports the reintroduction of the death penalty.

The Ukrainian crisis

The invasion of Ukraine puts Orban in a difficult situation: on the one hand he cannot fully support it, especially given Hungary's history with Russia, but on the other hand he does not want to get angry with his friend Putin.

He has adopted a balanced position: he welcomes Ukrainian refugees (in contradiction with his previous anti-migrant policy, but as for other European countries, white Christians are not really migrants, especially if they come from the former greater Hungary!), votes for sanctions but does not allow weapons to cross the country and rejects any embargo on Russian oil and gas, under the pretext of not penalizing "Hungarian families".

The failure of the anti-Orban coalition

The six opposition parties that formed an electoral coalition – MSZP (socialist), Demokratikus Koalíció (centre-left), LMP (liberal ecologist), Párbeszéd (centre-left ecologist), Momentum (liberal) and Jobbik – published a document entitled "Guarantees for a change of era" which promised in particular "the drafting of a new Constitution [...] submitted to referendum", the return of "a balanced public audio-visual service" instead of "false and hateful propaganda", "restoring the independence of the judiciary", Hungary's accession to the European Public Prosecutor's Office, the introduction of an electoral law "based on proportionality" and the election of the president by direct universal suffrage.

The electoral system means that a party or coalition presents both a candidate for the post of Prime Minister and candidates for the posts of deputies. Whoever has the most votes in the election (even if it is less than 50%) wins both the post of Prime Minister and the majority of MPs.

Note the presence in the coalition of Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary), a former far-right party that has refocused. Stemming from radical and nationalist roots, in its early days, the party described itself as "a principled, conservative and radically patriotic Christian party", whose "fundamental objective" "is the protection of "Hungarian values and interests"". In 2014, the party was clearly anti-Semitic and a "neo-Nazi party". From 2015 to 2020 (amid increasingly harsh Fidesz rhetoric), the party began to redefine itself as a more moderate conservative people's party and changed the controversial elements of its message, culminating in its new declaration of principles now defining itself as a right-wing pro-European centre-party with some residual moderate nationalist tendencies (the position originally occupied by Fidesz). According to the party's "Declaration of Principles", Jobbik "will always focus on the interests of Hungary and the Hungarian people rather than on a political group or ideology." In any case, Jobbik voted for the law against "homosexual propaganda" in 2021. In the general elections on 8 April 2018 the party won 1,092,806

votes, obtaining 19.06% of the total, making it the second biggest party in the National Assembly. The strategy of refocusing the party undertaken in 2014 resulted in the emergence of more radical dissident formations, including “Our Homeland Movement”.

The coalition’s candidate for prime minister was Peter Marki-Zai, who defines himself as a former Fidesz voter, disappointed by corruption and illiberalism. He calls himself honest, Catholic and conservative. He opposed the increase in the minimum wage, believing that the market would be able to regulate remuneration, and a reform of the tax system. In an interview in November 2021, he said that “for the moment, it is in Hungary’s interest to be a tax haven”, with a corporation tax of 9%. He is in favour of Hungary’s entry into the Eurozone.

During the campaign, he defended NATO, even declaring that he was ready to send the Hungarian army to Ukraine if NATO asked him to. This statement was used excessively by Fidesz’s propaganda, looping on all the media for days, to demonstrate that he endangered “Hungarian families”, and that only Orban’s “neutral” position could protect these families from the war.

The lesson of this failure is clear: waging a liberal campaign, without any measures for the popular classes, can only lead to failure in the face of far-right populism; capitalist Europe is largely discredited, while the Hungarian economy has been regulated by the multinationals since the fall of the Berlin Wall; NATO is seen as a purely defensive protection, as long as it does not engage.

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P.S.

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