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## **Hungary: The Illiberal Crisis Management**

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### **Abstract**

The Hungarian government's crisis management fit well the illiberal logic of the current regime. It was characterized by strong leadership of Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán who personally controlled the first wave of fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. His unquestionable leadership was further reinforced by a controversial law that provoked intense internal and international criticism. These criticisms were used by the progovernment camp to present that the government and PM struggle for the safety of Hungarian people is under constant political attack of the liberal and global enemies of the regime. During the crisis similar discursive strategies were used as usual in Hungarian politics: the threat of immigration, the decline of the Western world and the EU, the adversarial role of George Soros, the Hungarian opposition, the media and the international liberal mainstream, and the effectiveness of nation-states were recurring topics during the crisis. Overall, the country was less affected by the virus, and according to the polls people positively evaluate the crisis management.

### **The Political Context**

The ruling Fidesz–KDNP parties won two-thirds supermajorities in the Hungarian National Assembly in three elections in a row since 2010. However, in the local elections of 2019 Fidesz suffered sensitive losses unprecedented since the birth of the regime, and the collaborated opposition could win in several larger cities including the capital. While there is extensive public and academic debate about the character of the Orbán-regime, its illiberal or non-liberal nature is widely accepted and suggested by Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán himself in his famous speech in 2014 (Buzogány 2017 p. 1307–1308). To support the ideal of the illiberal state, the ruling coalition often uses the label 'liberal' against the critics of the government, by which it proves that they are defending the nation from mainstream international actors that would sell out the country to the IMF or other transnational institution. These conflicts are often framed into crises narratives such as the lingering economic collapse of 2008 or the refugee/migration wave of 2015 (see: Köröseyi, Illés & Gyulai 2020). The crises are utilised to justify nationwide communication campaigns against the so-called liberal mainstream such as "Brussels", NGOs, international media, the Obama-administration or George Soros. The most durable campaigns

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were against immigration and included billboards, radio, TV and internet ads raising awareness to the risks of uncontrolled immigration. The government often initiates 'national consultation' in topics that are owned by the government which is a government-sponsored opinion poll with the entire population as its sample.

### Chronology

The Operational Group (OG) responsible for the control of the new coronavirus epidemic was set up by government decision at the end of January. After its formation, the following major events took place in Hungary:

Date	Events, issues
04/03	The COVID-19 reached Hungary. Two infected Iranian citizens studying in Hungary were the first to be identified.
10/03	Orbán: There is a clear link between illegal migration and the coronavirus epidemic.
11/03	After the Operational Group proposed the emergency order to the government, the government proclaimed the state of emergency (including stay-at-home order) in the entire country. The number of infected people was 13.
15/03	The first Hungarian coronavirus patient died.
16/03	Schools, kindergartens, baby day cares closed on this day.
21/03	The number of new coronavirus infections: 103 people. 7 cured and 4 died from the virus.
23/03	The opposition voted against the urgency of the time-unlimited coronavirus law that was often referred to as 'Enabling' Act by the critics.
30/03	With 138 votes for, and 53 against, the Hungarian Parliament had passed the 'Enabling' or COVID-19 Act and President János Áder signed the bill in record time.
31/03	The government announced that they would release the infection map which showed that most of the infections happened in the capital and the county around the city.
04/04	On the 4 <sup>th</sup> and the 6 <sup>th</sup> , the government announced its economic and epidemic protection program.
09/04	The Prime Minister announced that the curfew would be extended indefinitely.
13/04	The number of people infected with the virus was 1,458, and the number of victims increased to 109.
29/04	Prime Minister announced in his Facebook video address that the reboot of the country can begin. As the outbreak was the most intense in Budapest and the surrounding areas, the stay-at-home order would remain in effect in the capital and Pest county. There were altogether 1,891 active cases in Hungary.

03/05	This day was the expected peak of coronavirus. The number of fatalities in Hungary rose to 340. 629 people have recovered from the disease. The number of active cases was 2,029. The number of registered infected people was 2,998.
16/05	Restrictions would be eased in Budapest from the 18 <sup>th</sup> , Viktor Orbán announced on Facebook.
18/05	The prevalence of COVID-19 infections was low in Hungary, according to a joint, representative study of medical universities.
27/05	The repeal of the 'enabling' or coronavirus law had been submitted to the parliament and accepted on June 16 <sup>th</sup> .
18/06	107 days after the first infections, the state of emergency ended. The number of identified infected people in Hungary was 4,079. The number of deaths was 568, and 2,564 had recovered. The number of active infections was 947. 199 coronavirus patients were in hospital, of whom 15 were on ventilators.

Table X The chronology of the main events during the pandemic in Hungary

At the early phase, from January the first cases in China appeared in the Hungarian press as a 'mysterious respiratory disease'. The opposition news dealt a lot with the spreading of the virus, while pro-government media were more sceptical about it, often claiming that it is not that dangerous as presented in the international and opposition news. Also, pro-government media outlets often accused opposition media of devoting too much attention to it and cause unjustified panic. The Prime Minister also claimed at the end of February that "*Although the coronavirus is attracting now all the attention, the historical challenge we face is still the migration itself*".<sup>4</sup> The government argued that there was enough protective equipment in health care facilities to the effective defence, which claim was often challenged by the opposition. A recurring concern in the pro-government side during this first phase was the presence of fake news around the topic.

During the second phase, after the first cases were confirmed, a dominant topic in the pro-government side was the link between illegal migration and the coronavirus epidemic which was fuelled by the fact that the first cases were students from Iran. This link was highly challenged by the opposition camp. At the same time, the opposition media and the Hungarian Medical Chamber (MOK) warned that "*the already squeezed Hungarian healthcare faces the coronavirus without reserves*".<sup>5</sup> However, it was highly disputed and attacked by the government and the pro-government media who highlighted that the country and the health care system was well-prepared to handle the virus. The effective protection against the virus and the need for various restrictions became an important topic in this period.

In the third phase after the first restrictions were announced on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, the pro-government side emphasized the importance of national unity and strongly attack the opposition for threatening this. Also, the timing and determination of government action were praised. Meanwhile, the opposition media argued that the quality of government communication was insufficient, and they often challenged measures of the government and their implementation.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedekek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-a-kossuth-radio-jo-reggelt-magyarorszag-cimu-musoraban-20200228>

<sup>5</sup> <https://444.hu/2020/03/13/tartalekok-nelkul-nez-szembe-az-eleve-kifacsart-magyar-egeszsegugy-a-koronavirussal>

At the end of March, the so-called 'Enabling' or COVID-19 Act sparked strong critics and protest of the opposition and the international public. They warned that the law may go against essential human rights and fundamental freedoms. In contrast, the pro-government side emphasized its necessity for the effective defence and claimed that the European elite, the international liberal mainstream, NGOs and the Hungarian opposition – all connected to George Soros –, made a coordinated political attack on the Hungarian government to make the Hungarian government fail.

From April a further central discourse was the conflict between the government and Gergely Karácsony, the opposition mayor of Budapest. Referring the high number of infection in a nursing home in Budapest, the pro-government side heavily attacked the mayor arguing that he was personally responsible for this central hub of the pandemic. However, Karácsony claimed that the municipality acted prudently, they purchased tests and protective equipment, as the government did not ensure these, and the OG did not inform him properly about the situation. Another controversial topic was the decision of the Minister of Human Resources to evacuate at least 60% of publicly funded hospital beds to make free rooms for new coronavirus patients. As an argument, the government referred to its philosophy of 'prepare for the worst but hope for the best' as this way they could avoid situations seen in other Western countries. In contrast, the opposition attacked the government for ignoring chronic patients falling out of the shrinking health care system.

Another highly discussed topic was the European and global political consequences and lessons of the pandemic. The pro-government side often claimed the failure of the Western liberal world, and contrast it with the success of the CEE region. They also argued that the coronavirus showed the inefficiency of the EU in a crisis. The crisis could only be handled by strong nation-states and real political leaders, and the most effective form of international collaboration during the crisis is the bilateral cooperation between countries. They also claimed that these lessons should have long-term consequences on the global and European political order. On the other hand, the opposition side often stressed that many European countries acted faster or more efficiently than Hungary.

Social network sites, especially Facebook, were intensively used by both political actors, media outlets and ordinary citizens during the crisis. This is well illustrated by the fact that one of the most important information resources of the crisis, Viktor Orbán's Facebook page, gained more than 200 thousand new followers during the first weeks of the crisis, and his Instagram account was also heavily used. On the one hand, Facebook has become one of the most important information resources for citizens as the heightened engagement over this topic made countless related information pieces widely visible. At the same time, numerous fake news content also spread widely. Many of them were unveiled and corrected by mainstream media outlets, and in several cases, the police arrested the publishers of fake news content by the means of the newly enacted 'Enabling' or COVID-19 Act. A few of these incidents provoked lively controversy in the public about the state of the freedom of speech and its alleged violation. On the other hand, social media platforms were efficient tools for ordinary citizens to organize their work and life while keeping social distance. Solidarity and civic political self-organization actions were also made on the platform. Several groups were organized to coordinate voluntary and supportive actions, but protests against the controversial 'Enabling' or COVID-19 Act including petitions and an online protest event took also place on the platform.

## Analysis

One of the most important features of the Hungarian crisis management was the clear prominence of Viktor Orbán's leadership during the pandemic. This is not surprising since Körösenyi, Illés and Gyulai (2020) demonstrated that the crisis discourse, whether it is exogenous or endogenous, is an inherent part of the Orbán-regime. This is what triggers the emergence of charismatic leadership that the regime is based on (p. 38). Nonetheless, at the first latent phase of the crisis before the virus broke into the country, the prime minister seemed to stay away from the COVID-19 topic. However, since the virus reached Hungary, Viktor Orbán has soon become the prime decision-maker, information resource and face of the Hungarian crisis management.

Orbán's main communication platform was his own Facebook page where he kept informed the followers about the day-to-day work of the crisis management. Most important information was announced here in video format by his own words from the first death case through the restrictions and regulations to the economic measures often from his office. Further, as it is usual anyway, the prime minister gave more detailed interviews on each Friday on the national radio, where he offered more elaborated explanations for the crisis management and evaluations of the current situation and its political context. His third main communication platform was the parliament where he directly answered to the critics of the opposition five times until the end of May. Overall, the PM's communication on these platforms largely shaped the public discourse of the COVID-19 as the most important information of the crisis and arguments for its management appeared in these utterances which in turn were highly echoed in both sides of the political spectrum. Even the government's crisis management advertisement campaign and the main slogans used during the pandemic were built around Viktor Orbán's speeches.

Beyond this discursive dominance, the prominence of leadership manifested in the one-man and highly hierarchical decision-making structure. This was explicitly claimed by Viktor Orbán in one of his radio interviews: "*I felt important now that I manage this defence personally*".<sup>6</sup> From the beginning of the crisis, he kept talking about the different measures in the first person singular as his own decisions. However, this one-person decision-making, responsibility-taking, omnipotent role do not mean an omniscient image of leadership. The PM often emphasized that he is not competent in pandemic and viruses therefore his main task as a leader is to collect all scientific evidence and expert opinions on the topic. However, these expert opinions are not able to directly lead political measures, these should be decided and made by the leader drawing upon his common sense, but properly informed by factual pieces of evidence and predictions. He explicitly justified the one-man leadership of the crisis management by this argument when he continued the above-cited sentence about his leadership: "*And this is not because I'm competent in health care policy – I cannot be accused of it -, but I have the common sense*".<sup>7</sup>

For these reasons, the constant, active and information-collecting presence is an important part of his leadership image which was primarily and intensively reported on his Facebook and Instagram page. Several short video spots presented his unexpected visits in hospitals and other

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<sup>6</sup> Radio Kossuth, 05/08/2020.

<sup>7</sup> Radio Kossuth, 05/08/2020.

state institutions where he was shown as asking information from the directors, the staff or even the patients. He told in a radio interview that even if these visits may be unnecessary from a rational point of view, “*my instinct suggests that I have to go*”<sup>8</sup> and collect information in hospitals. Also, many contents showed his official meetings with experts and staff members where he also personally collected the relevant information. The image of hard-working leadership was depicted by the timing of these events, often recorded in the description of social media posts. Many contents reported about meetings in the very early morning and the late-night hours, and even on the morning of Easter Sunday, the PM visited a hospital in the countryside.

This charisma-based and hardworking leadership image was further emphasized by contrasting his political activity with other political actors. While these contrasts appeared mostly in the communication of other governmental politicians and the pro-government media, in some cases Viktor Orbán highlighted some contrasting points himself. The main contrast was drawn with the oppositional mayor of the capital, Gergely Karácsony, who was shown as an indecisive, responsibility-avoiding, inactive leader who was mostly communicating rather than acting during the crisis. A more explicit contrast-making was evident when Viktor Orbán said in one of his radio interviews that Karácsony is a ‘theoretical-minded’ leader who may be able to write ‘great studies’ about the events, but unable to make effective and firm decisions. Though the management of a crisis requires ‘practical-minded’ leaders who can act and take responsibilities.<sup>9</sup> Another characteristic contrast was often made with the political class of the European Union who was claimed as ineffective in crisis management but active in ‘political attacks’ against the ‘country’. This contrast was made explicit by the PM when he kept claiming in interviews and open letters to European leaders that he did not have time to deal with political critics and controversies during the crisis, because its effective management requires all the energies he has. Recurring further contrast was drawn with the crisis management of the previous left-wing governments that was shown as wrong and ineffective as opposed to the successful management of this crisis, but this contrast was mostly related to the economic measures.

As a last but important feature of the crisis leadership of Viktor Orbán, the personal style of his communication should be addressed. On his social media communication ordinary people, personal stories and remarks, celebrities often appeared and in his interviews, he often talks about the everyday difficulties and pleasures of ordinary people in a rather personal way. Overall, he used a highly mundane language to explain measures, political dilemmas and complicated arguments.

Beyond Viktor Orbán, one of the main actors during the crisis was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, whose main issues included bringing back Hungarian citizens stuck abroad, coordinating the foreign, mainly Chinese, acquisition of protective equipment and the donations to other countries and especially to Hungarian communities beyond the borders. The performances in these areas were presented as ones of the most important political achievements during the crisis, and they were intensively communicated with concrete numbers in several platforms. These messages fit well into the line of the main official slogans of the

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<sup>8</sup> Radio Kossuth, 04/10/2020.

<sup>9</sup> Radio Kossuth, 05/15/2020.

crisis management such as “*no Hungarian is alone*” and the “*every Hungarian is responsible for every Hungarian*”. Péter Szijjártó was also active in the international defence of the Hungarian government’s position in the question of the ‘Enabling’ or COVID-19 Act. In this area other members of the Government such as the Minister of Justice, Judit Varga and the State Secretary of International Communication and Relations, Zoltán Kovács were also highly involved who appeared in several international media outlets to react to the international critics. In turn, these reactions have become important referential points in the domestic discourse to show how the government was struggling with the international political ‘attacks’. Ministers responsible for the economy were also prominent actors during the crisis concerning their specific areas. However, it is noticeable that members of the government who are officially responsible for the health care policy were hardly visible in the public discourse.

An important actor of the official communication was the Operational Group whose one of the most important tasks was the day-to-day information service through daily press conferences and on an online website. Although the members who publicly represented the Operational Group were leaders of law enforcement bodies and health care sector rather than politicians, the judgement of their work was divisive in the public discourse. While the pro-government public was supportive of the work and personalities of these members, the opposition discourse was more critical to the quality of their information service.

Another main actor was Gergely Karácsony, the oppositional mayor of the capital. Besides his contrasting role to the Prime Minister, he was highly critical with the crisis management of the government, but sometimes he publicly expressed his support for some of its measures. He also heavily used his Facebook page to react to the critics and defend his position, attack the government, and present his city-level crisis management often as a contrast to the government's approach.

Experts and scientists were prominent actors during the crisis. On the one hand, both pro- and anti-government media outlets were keen to give space for experts such as virologists, doctors and economists. However, there were significant differences in the circles of these experts across the media outlets based on political leanings. In the pro-government media outlets, only experts who were supportive with the measures of the government appeared, while in the opposition media outlets experts were often critical with these steps. On the other hand, as discussed above, the government also highly drawn upon the experts, even if the PM made it clear that expertise cannot replace political decisions. Nonetheless, Viktor Orbán often referred to the opinions and advice of experts when explaining his decisions, and while the latter provoked much criticism in the opposition, the underlying expert arguments were rarely challenged.

Although there was no major contradiction of the information provided by officials, some decisions caused confusion. For instance, originally the government was against the closure of schools, kindergartens and baby nurseries. On the morning of the day when the PM announced the closures, he argued in the national radio that closures are not necessary as it would endanger the school year, teachers should go on unpaid leave and parents should stay home to take care of their children. However, at 9 PM Viktor Orbán announced in a live Facebook video address that the schools, kindergartens and nurseries will be closed and remote teaching will start.

Another confusion was about the territorial data on infections. At the beginning of the epidemic, this information was not made public. Mayors, heads of regional or municipal institutions and



ordinary citizens published some of the data based on the knowledge what they had. Eventually, the infection map was released at the end of March. Otherwise, the messages from the officials regarding the threat and the handling of the virus were clear, the objectives were communicated. Since the middle of May, the government has kept declaring that the Hungarian management of the crisis was incredibly successful. While many oppositional actors reject this claim, according to some of the polls, crisis management is positively evaluated by the majority of the voters.<sup>10</sup> At the end of May, Viktor Orbán announced that the government launch ‘national consultation’ about the management of the crisis.

### Literature

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