

Mainstreaming the Far Right: Cultural Politics in Hungary

Abstract: *In the following I will discuss the influence of the far Right on the formation of symbolic politics of the Fidesz government in Hungary. This phenomenon will be interpreted in the context of the Hungarian political regime as a whole.*

Keywords: *Cultural politics, far-right, Hungary.*

In post-2010 Hungary cultural policy cannot be viewed as one of the governmental sectors separable from prime minister Viktor Orbán's concept of power and symbolic politicking. The autocratic worldview and the nationalist political culture, represented by his rule are closely related to what his underlings perform under the rubric "cultural policy". The cadres appointed as chiefs of a sector act according to the prime minister's expectations. They act in a way to implement Orbán's strategic goal toward the far Right. This politics aims to absorb extremist ideas in order to keep potential far Right voters with-

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in the supporters of Fidesz and to test some of future governmental policies on them as well. By pursuing this strategy for several years, by now Orbán achieved that there is not much difference between the cultural policies of the extreme right and the center which became increasingly radical over the past years.¹

Yet culture is a terrain that cannot be totally controlled. Not only because of the widespread use of electronic communicational means but also because culture is peculiar; inherently diverse and autonomous in terms of its creation and reception and potentially unconventional in providing new modes of perception and thinking. Institutions can be seized, a cultural administration can be unseated but culture cannot be replaced with the help of hate campaigns, propaganda, or symbolic politicking. For the Orbán regime, symbolic politicking is a means of dismissing cultural diversity and legitimizing its own dominance by mainstreaming political extremism of the far Right. In the following I will discuss the specifics of this phenomenon with special attention to the impact of the Hungarian far Right party, the Jobbik.²

Led by former student activist Gábor Vona, Jobbik is a radical Right wing party espousing an extreme nationalist, and, interestingly, a parallel pro-Putin Russophile ideology. It has exhibited blatant anti-Semitism and had been criticized for its members' purposely intimidating stances towards Hungary's significant Roma population as well as

for its paramilitary wing, the Hungarian Guard (*Magyar Gárda*). The party has led the charge to restore Hungary to its former glory, utilizing old national symbols and foundational myths to construct an image of a unified, homogeneous, Christian nation that must take back what had been taken from them by centuries of foreign domination, communist rule, and a weak post-transition democratic state.

During the 2010 electoral campaign, Jobbik revealed its 10 points action program which contained all those policy changes that had been long considered by the party as the most urgent ones.³ Summarizing this program in a nutshell, first of all, Jobbik declared zero tolerance to corruption and to “politician’s crime”, just as they claimed to abolish parliamentary immunity. Secondly, the party promised tax cuts and more jobs. Third, they claimed that banks should have contributed in overcoming the economic crisis by paying higher tax, and also to save those debtors who were unable to pay back their loan due to changing currency rates. Fourth, they demanded the nationalization of the energy sector to cut utility prices. Fifth, they promised higher taxation of the multinationals (many of them had enjoyed tax exemption). Sixth, Jobbik promised to cut the high pensions of former communist leaders back to minimum level. Seventh, they insisted that social benefits should have transferred only if recipients did public work. Eighth, Jobbik promised to stop selling Hungarian land to foreign citizens. Ninth, they declared to install the gendarmerie to supplement the police in maintaining law and order. Finally, the party promised Hungarian citizenship to those ethnic Hungarians who lived outside Hungary due to the consequences of the Trianon Peace Treaty.⁴ By 2015, eight points, out ten, are implemented by the Fidesz government. Only the first and the ninth points are left out. It seems that Viktor Orbán simply executes the demands of the far Right in domestic politics. The extreme Right is neither contained, nor isolated in Hungary. On the contrary, it has been becoming the mainstream. Quite unusually, democracy in Hungary was not deconstructed by the far Right but by an “extreme center” which elevated far Right propositions to the core of its government policies.

Contrary to some earlier expectations, Jobbik emerged not as the party of the losers of political and economic transformation. Research made clear that the average Jobbik supporter was a middle class man with some qualifications, and thanks to the relatively sound financial background of his family, he might not have suffered from the regime change in any way. Such people joined Jobbik not for financial benefits but rather for symbolic and identity-related reasons which included traditional prejudice and hatred toward Jews and the Roma. These middle-class Jobbik supporters might feel that their social status was simultaneously endangered from below, by those who were dragging down the better-off (i. e. the ‘parasites’ who live off state handouts, a symbol of Roma people), and from above, by a liberal-cosmopolitan elite group (symbolized by the Jews) which allegedly took leadership positions in all dominant segments of the society.

The remedy offered by Jobbik to this endangerment of identity is a vision of the nation that is strictly confined and homogeneous, both ethnically and in terms of its values.⁵ The vision of homogeneous national culture contradicts to the existence of minority cultures therefore far Right supporters expect the government to homogenize culture for themselves, according to their anti-pluralistic view of the nation.

From Popular Sovereignty to Sovereign Leadership

The policies of the Right wing Fidesz government coming to power in 2010 covertly suggested that in times of crisis it is appropriate to limit the rule of law in a democratic state. The idea of national sovereignty was soon replaced by the idea of sovereign leadership. It is the sovereign deciding about a state of emergency, as Carl Schmitt once observed⁶, and it soon became obvious that, for Viktor Orbán and his staff subscribing to authoritarian politics sovereignty is more important than democracy. If the mainstream European idea of democracy is liberal, then the new anti-liberal politics would rely not on this version but democracy's "sovereign", "Eastern", "majoritarian", "authoritarian" cousin, limited and deviating from the interpretive framework of international conventions.⁷ This politics was always open to the far Right. It was in this spirit that Orbán's underlings in the cultural sector made statements such as "I don't care a damn about this democracy!" by the head-of-state's highest ranking cultural gatekeepers, president of the formerly right wing private society, now called Hungarian Academy of Arts (*Magyar Művészeti Akadémia* = MMA), a cultural client organization inscribed into the Fundamental Law by the Orbán regime.

The government enjoying a two-third parliamentary majority due to a distorted election scheme has curtailed the democratic rule of law in the name of "national sovereignty". It has cut back on the freedom of press, education, and religion; limited the purview of institutions serving to protect the Constitution and human rights, the freedom of assembly, the autonomy of courts, the legal process of plebiscite and popular initiatives, the rights to strike and of trade unions, as well as axed social insurance as a civil right. These amendments have gone beyond a state reform profoundly affecting societal relations, and thus may be dubbed as a form of re-feudalization. Not only has the autonomy of governmental sector been eliminated; in effect, all groups of public employment have been integrated into a state bureaucratic order or chamber. The outbreak of economic crisis in 2008 offered the prime minister the opportunity to redefine the political situation as revolutionary, that is, a state of emergency, and thereby to justify his personal need to expand his dominance.

Orbán replaced the Constitution with what was called a Fundamental Law, which essentially states that the citizens are ready to adjust to a new order, as he named the "System of National Cooperation" (*Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere* = NER). In 2011 a "constitutional coup", commanded from above, took place in Hungary. In the Parliament, the new constitution, the Fundamental Law, was supported by the representatives of the governing party only, while opposition MPs were either voting against it or not participating in the whole process.⁸ A liberal constitutional concept premised on the neutrality of the state was replaced by a confrontational notion of the state built on the dichotomy of "good" versus "bad" and "friend" versus "enemy". The key words of the new system are "work", "home", "order", "nation", and "family".⁹ These concepts were partly taken from the domestic far Right vocabulary, partly from the global neoconservative discourse.

This conception envisions a hierarchically organized society in which the fundamental components of the national unit are not individuals but families contributing with their hard work to the success of the nation construed metaphorically as an extended family or tribe. This entailed a significant turn in the realm of culture as the government's symbolic politics came to substitute for cultural policy. The only criterion of national identity is the tribally understood "national collectivity" – grounded in primordial ethnic and blood ties – manifesting itself in political loyalty.¹⁰

The concept of political nation gave way to the ethnic idea of national consciousness. On inaugurating the monument of “National Togetherness”, Viktor Orbán voiced his conviction that the Turul bird is the ancient image into which the Hungarians are born. Echoing Jobbik, he stated that “from the moment of our births, our seven tribes enter into an alliance, our Saint King Steven establishes a state, our armies suffer a defeat at the Battle of Mohács, and the Turul bird is the symbol of national identity of the living, the deceased, and the yet-to-be-born Hungarians.”¹¹ He conjectures that, like a family, the nation also has a natural home – in our case, the Carpathian Basin – where the state-organized world of work produces order and security, and one’s status in the hierarchy defines authority.¹² All these concepts have replaced an earlier public discourse whose central categories were liberal democracy, market economy, pluralism, inalienable human rights, republic, elected political community, and cultural diversity.¹³

In line with the Jobbik prescriptions, the Orbán regime launched an intensive re-nationalization with the aim to recuperate all the wealth that, in their view, was unfairly distributed in the earlier waves of privatization. This process is singularly governed by one political group parading in national colors, the Fidesz leadership. Political loyalty is the only marker of group membership; therefore it can be described as a political family attached closely to the most influential political entrepreneurs. Since re-nationalization was accompanied by the powerful centralization of the state, concepts such as “state interest”, “national interest”, “national culture” and so forth are defined by this small group – practically the prime minister acting as a head of the political family, who additionally controls the distribution of funds from the European Union. Orbán is constantly using EU funds to maintain his regime that has departed from the common European values.¹⁴

All of this cannot simply be viewed as a state capture; and, by virtue of its centralized organization and the demand for political loyalty, the phenomenon points beyond the concept of crony capitalism as well. The political and economic have for long been intermingled in the Fidesz enterprise in that state capture was the prerequisite of the re-nationalization project, which in turn was followed by achieving further political and economic goals. The primary political goal included the radical transformation and centralization of the power structure, the elimination of the law’s autonomy, the relativization of democratic polity, and, certainly, staying in power. The economic goal consists in the re-privatization of the newly accumulated state assets, the rewarding of individuals belonging to the political family and the circle of supporters promising further political advantages. Nationalization has been succeeded by another round of privatization with which the current elite, relying on small groups of indispensables and influentials as opposed to the majority of society¹⁵, attempted to render its newly produced status quo irreversible. Critics of this move stated that the mafia had moved into the state apparatus, moreover, it later became almost identical with the state.¹⁶

All these swings seem similar to the elitist versus populist political rotational system of some other countries, just as to the troubling trend towards Right wing populist and extreme nationalist movements across Europe. Yet the turn in Hungary goes deeper, since behind Orbán is a qualitative majority rather than merely an obliged stratum of cadres. It was on these grounds that the prime minister could proclaim a so-called “national freedom fight” against the European Union of which his country is a member. In this spirit, Orbán called for public discussion about the reinstatement of death penalty (which contradicts to the basic Charter of the EU), a tougher treatment of the refugees (renamed as “economic migrants”), and the introduction of government-initiated “national consultation”, a set of biased questions to be used for populist political purposes, instead of nationwide popular referendum.

What makes this autocratic political experiment unusual is that the attempt at this transformation is being carried out in an unsuited political system environment – in a multi-party context where democratic norms prevail – by a member of the European democracies' union. Because of these constraints, at times, the leaders of NER have to couch the defense of their rule in a democratic discourse as well. Hypocrisy thus forms an integral part of the emergent post-communist mafia-state's workings.¹⁷

The head of the ruling political family builds his power on the following elements: first, hegemonic power; second, nationalism based on ethnicity; third, social exclusion; fourth, a radical change of elites; fifth, the politics of force, and, sixth, the idea of an alleged revolutionary situation. The cult of power, the national reunification cum social exclusion together with the idea of revolutionary elite change, all go hand in hand with Jobbik's demands. All of these go beyond simple rhetoric being as they are the cornerstones of the actual sectoral policies of the Orbán government, including its cultural policy. Ideologically, the regime is based on the ideas of the autonomy of the political, sovereign leadership, leader democracy, and political constitutionalism.¹⁸ The moral and legal foundations of the regime are increasingly weakening, that is why politics is increasingly seen as a set of immoral and illegal games of corruption driven by the oligarchic political elite.

From the start, Orbán has endeavored to underpin his power by several pillars. To put it in sociological terms, he wanted to draw simultaneously on what Max Weber described as legal-rational, charismatic, and traditional legitimacies.¹⁹ In his debates and on the European political forums he relies on his legal-rational legitimacy gained through a democratic election. In front of his party adherents and his devoted voters, however, he appears as a charismatic politician. In the eyes of his lower middle class voters in the countryside Orbán's credibility is granted by the way he reincarnates a plebeian and "kuruc" habitus entrenched in Hungarian history, in other words, traditional legitimacy.²⁰

The Fidesz party has no internal power groups critical of the prime minister and articulating political alternatives, therefore the leader's will tends to prevail without any restraints. This would not have been possible without total discipline within the Fidesz fraction where no deserters, dissidents, internal opponents, leavers or members switching party allegiance are tolerated. The so called "revolution" led to the Fidesz leadership occupying the state, and through its hierarchic re-organization, their tentacles reach everywhere. From the party, no free exit is possible that would allow for a former Fidesz representative to go on with his or her life as a private citizen. It is not worth deserting because the party may go after such a person and undermine his or her livelihood.

For more than a decade now, the Fidesz has not been operating as a democratic party but rather as a tribe or family. Becoming cast off from the family means falling into an abyss. However, Orbán is keen to keep his adherents within the party/family's celestial sphere in order to avoid creating martyrs and shifters of loyalty. The "revolutionary" ruling party governed by the slogan of "those who are not with us are against us" outwardly speaks the language of populism to the public; inwardly, for its members, however, it produces situations of extortion viscerally associated with belonging to a mafia. "Wile fear is governing life"²¹ in every nook of the government and the party operated as the transmission belt of the sovereign's power.

Changing Faces of Cultural Policy

For the first Orbán government (1998-2002) culture played a strategically vital role to legitimize its rule within the framework of democratic polity. At the millennial celebrations of the Hungarian Conquest, the prime minister attempted to locate culture in the context of Hungary's thousand year old statehood so as to solidify the continuity of traditional Hungarian Right wing politics. At the time, he did not refer to a revolution but repeatedly stated that more than a governmental change had occurred with his election.

During this period, the former royal crown was taken from the National Museum to the Parliament of the Republic; an independent cultural ministry called Ministry of National Cultural Heritage was established; the House of Terror Museum, the Millenáris Culture Center of Budapest, and the National Theater opened, and thousands of flags were donated to small towns. In addition, landmark buildings of Budapest were renovated including the Basilica, the Sándor Palace, the Urania National Motion Picture Theater, and the Sports Arena suited to house both cultural and sports events. The Széchenyi Program was launched with the premier of the mega-budget film *The Bridgeman (Hídember)* serving as its ideological underpinning – a parable for posterity based on the 19th century national liberal reformer, István Széchenyi's life. During this era moreover the building of the Holocaust Documentation Center and the Palace of the Arts began, later inaugurated by the socialist-liberal government. Tellingly, the Left wing governments tended to bring the constructions started by the right wing to fruition, while the right coalitions terminated, delayed, or radically revamped the projects launched by the Left. Orbán is of the conviction that only the Right wing can unify the nation whereas the divisive left “strikes at its own nation” time and time again.^{10m} In his speech at a Summer School at Tusnádfürdő in August 2005 Orbán put it in this way: “. . . whenever the Left had a chance, they struck at their own nation. This is how Béla Kun and his comrades assaulted their own people in 1919 and this is how [Mátyás] Rákosi and his pals struck down at their own kin.

Notes

¹ One can even borrow the concept of “extreme center” from Tariq Ali, albeit the notion is used here in a different meaning in the East Central European context: describing not the promoters of liberal capitalism but promoters of mainstreaming extreme rightist ideas. Tariq Ali (2015) *The Extreme Centre*. London: Verso.

² Jobbik Magyarországért (Jobbik for a Better Hungary) was a minor radical movement which reached less than 1 per cent in the 2006 elections. However the party gained ground between 2006 and 2010 in lieu of the economic crisis and the rising anti-Roma sentiments, which resulted in a spectacular, 16 per cent result in the 2010 elections. Since that time, Jobbik is an opposition party in the Hungarian parliament. It became the second largest party after the 2014 municipal elections.

³ A Jobbik kormány első 10 intézkedése (The first 10 steps of the Jobbik Government) March 2010. http://alapszervezet.jobbik.hu/sites/alapszervezet.jobbik.hu/files/korm10_szoro_1-2_final.pdf

⁴ This Treaty was signed in the Trianon castle in Versailles in 1920, as a consequence that the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy lost the first World War and de facto ceased to exist.

⁵ Tamás Rudas (2010), “A jobbik törzsszavazóiról (On the Core Group of Jobbik Voters) in Tamás Kolosi and István György Tóth eds. *Társadalmi riport 2010*. (Social Report 2010) Budapest: TÁRKI, 512-26.

⁶ Carl Schmitt (2007 [1932]), *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press

⁷ This does not always entail abandoning the democratic system but rather shrugging off its liberal components. See Jan Pakulski & András Körösnéyi (2012), *Toward Leader Democracy*. London: Anthem Press. In most cases, however, these forms represent a transition between democracy and authoritarian rule.

⁸ Cf. Gábor Attila Tóth (2015), “Hungary’s Constitutional Transformation from a Central European Comparative Perspective” in Henning Glaser ed. *Norms, Interests, and Values: Conflict and Consent in the Constitutional Basic Order*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 129-158.

⁹ In more depth on this subject, see Umut Korkut (2012), *Liberalization Challenges in Hungary: Elitism, Progressivism, and Populism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 168-177.

¹⁰ For an anthropological approach see Margit Feischmidt & Kristóf Szombati (2016), “Understanding the Rise of the Far Right from a Local Perspective: Structural and Cultural Conditions of Ethno-traditionalist Inclusion and Racial Exclusion in Rural Hungary” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2016.1142445>.

¹¹ Viktor Orbán (2012), “Minden magyar a turulba születik” [All Hungarians Born Into the Turul Bird], *Népszabadság*, September 29.

¹² Jan-Werner Müller (2015), “Hungary: Sorry About Our Prime Minister” *New York Review of Books*, October 14.

¹³ For more detailed discussions, see András Bozóki (2011), “Occupy the State: The Orbán Regime in Hungary” *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*. Vol. 19. No. 3. December, 649-663.; (2012) Takis S. Pappas (2013), “Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary” *Government and Opposition*, July 2013, 1-23.; János Kornai (2015), “Hungary’s U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26. No. 3. July, 34-48.

¹⁴ R. Daniel Kelemen (2015), “Europe’s Hungary Problem: Viktor Orbán Flouts the Union” *Foreign Affairs*, September 20.

¹⁵ For a more in-depth discussion on the role of the “indispensable” and the “influential”, see Bruce Bueno de Mesquita & Alastair Smith (2011), *The Dictator’s Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

¹⁶ Bálint Magyar (2016), *The Post-Communist Mafia State*. Budapest – New York: Central European University Press.

¹⁷ The concept introduced by Magyar shares a number of traits with the neopatrimonial and sultanistic regimes as well as competitive authoritarian regimes but is not identical with any of them. See Shmuel N. Eisenstad (1973), *Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism*. Beverly Hills: Sage; Ulf Engel & Gero Erdmann (2007), “Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered: Critical Review and Elaboration of an Elusive Concept” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 45. No. 1. 95-119.; H. E. Chehabi & Juan J. Linz eds. (1998), *Sultanistic Regimes*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press; Steven Levitsky & Lucan A. Way (2010), *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸ In more detail see, Attila Antal (2016), “A politika védelmében” (In Defense of Politics), *Élet és Irodalom*, May 20.

¹⁹ Max Weber (1969): *Basic Concepts of Sociology*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

²⁰ After a governmental session held in a castle at Fertőd located in Western Hungary on June 22, 2013, Orbán averred that this visit represented a plebeian government’s paying tribute to the aristocracy’s accomplishment. <http://mno.hu/belfold/orban-egy-plebejus-kormany-tiszteleg-a-magyar-arisztokracia-elott-1167668>.

²¹ The expression, loosely cited here, was originally coined by the classic poet, Attila József in his poem *Hazám* [My Homeland] where he decries the prevailing atmosphere of fear in the Horthy era. Translated by Sándor Kerekes. <https://hungarianspectrum.wordpress.com/2015/01/03/attila-jozsefs-my-homeland-translated-by-sandor-kerekes/>.