

- Corruption issue is not seen as important.¹⁴⁷

Therefore, Fidesz is populist in its construction of a triadic relationship between the elite, ‘the people,’ and foreign migrants. Mudde’s definition of right-wing populism contains elements of nativism and authoritarianism which Fidesz’s popular base fulfills. Remember, 79% of those polled in 2015 supported harsher treatment of asylum seekers, and 41% advocated for the use of weapons against illegal immigrants along the border.¹⁴⁸ Such public sentiment strongly indicates dimensions of both nativism and authoritarianism. Given Hungarian economic history throughout the 20th century and since 1989, the left-wing preferences for state intervention in the domestic economy and flexible trade also come as no surprise.

It is also important to note that the CHES data placed thirteen or so European populist parties to the right of Fidesz. Nonetheless, Hungarian society is generally conservative, at least in recent decades. Approximately 65% of the Hungarian electorate voted for either Fidesz or Jobbik in 2014. According to the Eurobarometer in May 2017, 78% of voters had negative views toward immigration from outside the European Union, 45% were pessimistic about the future of the EU, and 29% stated that globalization was not an opportunity for economic growth.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, while Jobbik and Fidesz can both be populist, far-right, and Eurosceptic, it is unclear how helpful this comparison is. Perhaps the most significant difference is that Orbán constructed a political style from the characteristics of existing regimes like China and Russia, to formulate an example for others. Orbán delivered his infamous illiberal democracy speech in the context of trade and economic policy within the framework of global capitalism, while Jobbik rejects global capitalism in its entirety. Orbán used populism to create a more flexible government apparatus to

¹⁴⁷ Andre Tartar, “How the Populist Right Is Redrawing the Map of Europe,” *Bloomberg*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/>.

¹⁴⁸ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary’s Strongman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 173.

¹⁴⁹ Andre Tartar, “How the Populist Right Is Redrawing the Map of Europe,” *Bloomberg*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/>.

pivot toward illiberalism, while Jobbik is less prepared for the real world of geopolitics and international trade. Orbán, in many ways, is a functional populist, while Jobbik represents a less practical and extreme right-wing version. Nonetheless, Fidesz is undoubtedly a populist political party and Orbán is its leader.

4.3 The wearing down of democracy

The 2019 Freedom House Report claimed that Orbán and Fidesz worked methodically to deny critical voices a platform in the media or civil society since gaining power.¹⁵⁰ The government subsequently “forced the closure of Central European University, asserted control over the opposition, the media, religious groups, academia, NGOs, the courts, asylum seekers, and the private sector since 2010.”¹⁵¹ The report emphasized that while the effects of attacks on democratic institutions are not immediately apparent, they are devastating over time.

However, while the OSCE reports chart a degradation of Hungary’s procedural democracy and Freedom House emphasizes Orbán’s deviations from liberalism, the 2018 V-Dem report provides in-depth data which specifically illustrates noticeable declines in particular aspects of the political system. The report charts democracy from 2007 to 2017, and argues that during this period, Hungary transformed from a liberal democracy into an electoral democracy.¹⁵² During the ten-year window, Hungary declined in its liberal democracy index (LDI) and its electoral democracy index (EDI). The V-Dem standard for classification as an “electoral democracy” requires national fairly free and fair multiparty elections along with an Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) above .5, which relies on prerequisites concerning democratic

¹⁵⁰ Freedom House, Hungary Country Report, March 11, 2019, Accessed April 15, 2019.
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/hungary>.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² V-Dem Institute, “Democracy for All? V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018,” 2018,
https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/3f/19/3f19efc9-e25f-4356-b159-b5c0ec894115/v-dem_democracy_report_2018.pdf.

institutions. The LDI is made up of the electoral democracy index, liberal component index, egalitarian component index, participatory component index, and the deliberative component index. The data shows that Hungary declined in LDI because of declines in EDI, specifically in the sub-indices of freedom of association index, clean election index, and freedom of expression index.¹⁵³ This corroborates much of the information outlined in the OSCE reports and Fidesz's consolidation of state media apparatuses. To reiterate, from 2007 to 2017, which contained nearly two of Orbán's three supermajority governments, the most significant decline occurred in the index concerning freedom of expression and alternative sources to information. Also, five sub-indices declined, specifically, clean elections, freedom of association, the rule of law, participatory component, and deliberative component.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, similarities exist between the different sets of qualitative and quantitative data. As populist rhetoric, as indicated by the OSCE reports, resonated during elections, an illiberal crackdown on the media apparatus occurred. The progression from populist uproar to illiberal consolidation is supported by the reports and data indices, and illustrates just how populists can leverage crisis to ensure regime sustainability through illiberal systemic changes that prevent electoral losses. As indicated by his personal story and the OSCE data, Orbán views politics as a long-term endeavor, and used electoral gains to pivot toward illiberal governance for the longstanding preservation of power and Hungarian stability in a changing world.

¹⁵³ The 2018 V-Dem Annual Democracy report differentiates between liberal democracy and electoral democracy with the following explanation: "The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index reflects both the liberal and electoral principles of democracy, each of which constitutes one half of the scores for the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) is the first systematic measure of the de facto existence of all institutions in Robert Dahl's (1971, 1989) famous articulation of "polyarchy" as electoral democracy. For details about the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of all V-Dem's democracy indices, see Coppedge et al. (2018b) and Pemstein et al. (2018)."

V-Dem Institute, "Democracy for All? V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018," 2018.

https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/3f/19/3f19efc9-e25f-4356-b159-b5c0ec894115/v-dem_democracy_report_2018.pdf.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

5. Conclusions

Populism and illiberalism will continue to influence Hungary in the near future. In an effort to discuss the crisis in which the world finds itself, the analysis interpreted the fundamental concepts of democracy, liberalism, neoliberalism, populism, and illiberalism within the context of Hungary's recent political transition from a liberal democracy. The V-Dem study concludes that Hungary is now an electoral democracy, while Freedom House describes it as partly free.

However, while the neoliberal failures of the early twenty-first century contributed to the rise of Hungarian populism and illiberalism, they acted as seeds within a unique Hungarian political garden. The economic, geopolitical, domestic, and cultural-historical dimensions are specific to Hungary. While the scholarly debates assist in explaining the macro societal shifts during periods of economic and social stress, the country specific details further complicate but simultaneously color in the remainder of the story. While the mainstream media paints Hungary as a swift regression back to intolerance and executive decision-making because of xenophobia and personal greed, populism and illiberal governance are largely a response to the European debt crisis. These trends are global in scale as economic nationalism, bilateral diplomacy, and an emphasis on the domestic retake the political space between many foreign policy actors.

However, the primary goal of this investigation is to illuminate the potential reasons for the populist surge and its subsequent illiberal pivot in Hungary. Confronted with regional and global crisis, Hungary deviated from liberal values to restore levels of national sovereignty at the expense of European unity. The crisis, a product of inaction in the face of financial and migratory pressures, turned European politics closer toward China and Russia. Neoliberalism ceased to serve small domestic economies and systems while increased state intervention became a viable alternative. The Eastern systems, now in many ways, compete with those of the West,

while countries like Hungary interestingly carve out a new ‘Third Path’ of hybrid governance. Fidesz acquired support through populist politics and subsequently legitimized its pivot toward illiberal governance through electoral gains. The ‘people’ voted for populism because real debate vanished in a political space of complete convergence and subordination to Brussels.

Material interests and anxieties are at the forefront of the populist debate. While left-wing and right-wing populists differ on their conceptualizations of ideology, the people, the elite, and the general will, their arguments center on material security. Anti-EU positions in Budapest center on economic autonomy and the right to reject asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees. A lack of debate on topics like austerity or immigration led to the populist and illiberal transition and the convergence of all politicians to Brussels-backed positions abandoned deliberation and forced support to the fringes. However opportunistic, populism at least focused on the crises.

As indicated by Hungary’s story, Orbán watched convergence develop and acted accordingly to succeed and consolidate power. The lesson? The EU, as a political actor, cannot expect loyalty if it so evidently fails to act during periods of significant crisis. The moral of Europe’s current populism chapter, is that inaction to financial and social pressures will also entice a response, and perhaps, a fatal one. As Europe approaches decisive parliamentary elections later this month and the relevant debates continue to focus on economic and migratory policy, the world will see just how successful Orbán and his illiberal comrades are in persuading the people against EU ideals. If the illiberal coalition wins by a large margin with its populist rhetoric, the decoupling of democracy and liberalism may prove final. Regardless of the outcome, scholars of European democracy will remember May 2019 as a month of change.

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