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## Hungarian Exceptionalism or the Orbanisation of Europe?

1. The rise of populism, nationalism: a worldwide phenomenon or a unique Hungarian case? How to call the new political regimes in the making?

Thirty years after the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the dominance of liberal democracy has been profoundly challenged by a populist “counter-revolution” that emerged as a new *Zeitgeist* almost all over in Europe. This backlash has been driven by a cultural and anti-liberal resentment/nostalgia as well as caused by a well-spread protest against (perceived) relative social deprivation/inequality in the Western world and beyond. Populists, nationalists, soft and hard authoritarian politicians, new and old parties riding the new waves have benefitted from this change of public views and attitudes whilst accelerating the process using their shared political tool-box and cook-book how to undermine the current liberal order.

Timothy Snyder describes new authoritarian concepts, especially in the case of Putin’s Russia, as a move from the politics of inevitability (when progress is the key element of social changes) to the politics of eternity (when the only permanent entity, the nation, faces continuous external threats during a circular motion of history). According to Takis Pappas “populism is the polar opposite, and chief foe, of liberal democracy”. This approach expresses a major shift from previous optimistic opinions both in the public discourse and in the social science literature about the essence of populism and the potential risk populist parties and leaders represent. According to the common wisdom not so long ago, once in government position, populists need to adjust to the structural logic of the political system and have to obey forceful economic rules - or they would lose at the following elections because of their incompetence. This presumption cannot be supported any more: populists - after grasping executive power - start to deconstruct liberal democracy, try to abandon constitutional checks and balances, manipulate the electoral system, attack the independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the media, create a shrinking space for civil society and academic independence, and spread new nationalistic politics of memory as well enthrone national/ethnic identity. Populists deliberately increase political polarisation using communication campaigns based on fear-mongering and hysteria against former liberal-minded elites as well as marginalised out-groups - often labelling domestic and foreign individuals as the enemies of the people.

In fact, the real nature of modern populism is still heavily debated amongst scholars. Does populism actually possess a (micro)-ideology or should it be

rather defined as a (communication) style and/or a political strategy? Should we call the concept of majoritarian democracy - democratic anti-liberalism - still democratic at all having in mind its core claim that “it’s only us, who represent the (real) people/nation”, hence; a purely anti-pluralistic worldview as Jan-Werner Müller argued? A correct definition is supposed to include populist movements both from the right and the left sides of the political spectrum - which might use “host” ideologies like nationalism. Populist parties might differ and can be placed on a political scale starting from “soft” to “hard” populism with authoritarian tendencies. When these forces grasp power, the new political system they start to build can be found between liberal democracy and traditional dictatorship as hybrid regimes in a grey zone.

Nevertheless, there are intellectuals who go even further when elaborating what is the deeper substance in the views of anti-liberal political formations. French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy argues that the term populism should be simply changed for neo-fascism saying that “fear is the first symptom of tyranny”. Former American foreign minister Madeleine Albright sounded the alarm about the erosion of liberal democracy, both in the US and across the world, and the rise of what she described as a “fascist threat” which is “not an ideology; it’s a process for taking and holding power”. However, she was cautious when talking about Donald Trump: “I don’t call him a fascist because he isn’t violent” as well as about Viktor Orbán, who has “fascistic tendencies”, but did not cross potential red lines. Recently the most often cited scholar of the field, Cas Mudde prefers to speak about nativism instead of populist in the case of radical right wing – in other words: far right – parties: “within the core ideology of the populist radical right, populism comes secondary to nativism, and within contemporary European and US politics, populism functions at best as a fuzzy blanket to camouflage the nastier nativism”.

Well, as for Hungary, the new “laboratory experiment” initiated by Viktor Orbán after the landslide victory of his party Fidesz in 2010 seemed to be a unique case for a while marked with Hungarian exceptionalism and the special role of a charismatic and determined political personality in office. Today, the creation of the Hungarian “illiberal state” fits into the general tendency of emerging populist, nationalist and extreme-right wing political forces in Europe and beyond. Moreover, a couple of years ago there was no consensus amongst scholars whether Fidesz should be still categorised as a representative of the radical wing of the conservative/Christian-democratic centre-right family or it had already moved further to the camp of populist radical right-wing parties. By now, the position of Orbán’s party had been stabilised in the political science literature and in the international media as an anti-establishment and anti-European populist political formation - much before the tensions around the Hungarian leader inside the centre-right European People’s Party came to

surface in 2018 and 2019.

The strengthening of populist political forces almost all over in Europe, the problems caused by “existing populism” in Hungary and Poland that even jeopardise the functioning of the current European model, forced pro-European political groups – after a period of shock and paralysis - to take up the gauntlet. Viktor Orbán’s government and the new anti-liberal Hungarian regime have even been chosen as the main subjects of negative and alarming election messages by centrist and left wing parties in many EU member states. Actually, European elections in 2019 can be seen as more European than ever before especially because of the populist challenge at European level (and the dramatic consequences of the Brexit saga), so, the relevance of the breach with shared European values and practices by Hungarian and Polish populist leaders became more salient. As Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission and *Spitzenkandidat* of the European socialist party family formulated in a speech in Rome: “Italians feel let down and abandoned to govern the crisis on their own ... But whose fault is it? The Commission’s? No. Salvini’s friends have abandoned you. It is Orbán’s and Kaczyński’s fault.”

The antagonism between the pro-European mainstream and the nationalist/populist/anti-European forces has created the most significant political cleavage before the European elections in 2019 – making the outcome of the elections much more important than in the case of any previous contests. The polarisation between the traditional mainstream European elites and the emerging populist/authoritarian political forces will definitely influence European politics also in the longer run. A decisive element of the European election race for the votes and soul of the European/national citizens is the capability of the democratic-liberal political groups to resilience and renewal. According to optimists, pluralism inside the democratic camp gives citizens fair enough opportunities to choose amongst pro-European political parties in a new era of increasing partisan fragmentation that also marks the end of catch-all parties: liberal democracies have even survived bigger crises in modern history... After the turbulences and multiple crises during this decade, a new combination of courageous liberal identity politics together with fresh policy proposals might show the way out of the tunnel at the forthcoming European elections. In accordance with this approach, it is necessary to realise the risk how to fall into the populist trap. Jan-Werner Müller argued the following way: “In reality, the leaders described as “nationalists” are better understood as populist poseurs who have won support by drawing on the rhetoric and imagery of nationalism. Unfortunately, they have managed to convince not only their supporters but also their opponents that they are responding to deep nationalist yearnings among ordinary people. The more that defenders of liberalism and the liberal order buy the stories these leaders (and associated movements) are selling

and adopt the framing and rhetoric of populism, the more they allow their opponents' ideas to shape political debates. In doing so, parties and institutions of the center-left and the center-right are helping bring about the very thing they hope to avoid: more closed societies and less global cooperation to address common problems.”

On the other hand, it is still an open question what would happen to the European Union in case of a sweeping populist tide? Would new victorious politicians create a “Europe of Nations” instead of the current multi-level European setting - a mixture of supranational and intergovernmental mechanisms -, or would populists/semi-authoritarian leaders want to completely destroy the European project as we know it? If so, waiting for the outcome of the European elections in 2019, the anti-European political forces will probably not get any chance to put their hidden agendas into real practice.

## 2. The Orbán-factor inside the European Union: the strongman and the saviour of Europe?

Just a couple of months ago, it was a relevant topic whether Viktor Orbán can play an important role in future changes which might even undermine the historic integration process as the main cleavage between pro-Europeans and hard Eurosceptics has gradually sharpened. Would the European Union be unstoppable “Orbanised” and will the “eternal” Hungarian prime minister really go down in history as the strongman and the “saviour” of Europe? Viktor Orbán was seen as a trend-maker successfully spreading the populist virus inside the European Union. He even became a relevant ideologist as well as a hero in the eyes of populist right wing politicians and their electorates on the continent. When Orbán openly expressed mutual admiration to Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian radical right wing party, *Lega*, this new political friendship showed that the Hungarian Prime Minister’s political ambition has developed from a “counter-revolutionary” leader of the Central European regional resistance to be an unavoidable political heavy-weight at the top European level.

From 2010 onwards, Orbán’s radicalising criticism on the European institutions as a secular and out of touch bureaucratic machinery, and his on-going “provocations” against the European political establishment show (and unmask) an anti-liberal mission to be accomplished beyond pragmatic political manoeuvres. The lack of a united political will of all pro-European political elite groups and the uncertainty of the European institutions how to react to the systemic break with shared European values have resulted in a failure/inertia to stop and block the Hungarian prime minister in due time. Following infringement procedures introduced by the European Commission and numerous European Parliament resolutions like the Tavares report on Hungary, Orbán was

isolated as a bilateral partner by most of the leaders of the EU member states and suffered under negative coverage in the liberal media worldwide. Still, he was able to increase the speed of his peacock dance (as he called it), to improve his slippery tactics vis á vis the European institutions – two steps forward, one step back (having in mind Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s reverse remarks on the social democrats).

Orbán not only survived the first conflicts with the European political mainstream, but his shrewd political gamble contributed to the creation of his international fame. Orbán used his renegade status to position himself as the representative of alternative political ideas on the European stage – especially after the outbreak of the refugee crisis. During this period, the regional coalition-building among the Visegrád states, urged first of all by the Hungarian government, has seriously contributed to the perception that we face a deep East-West divide inside the European Union - especially related to the long and unsolved debates at European level about a relocation scheme for asylum-seekers based on European solidarity. Still, Orbán’s counter-offensive has not only expressed a nationalistic/regional/cultural interpretation of assumed “foreign attacks” led by “nihilists in Brussels” who do not respect “Hungary”, including charges against his Western opponents about their “double standard” criticism, but has gradually moved to an almost prophetic mission to save the whole of Europe and its Christian foundations from a perceived “Muslim invasion”. The leader of Fidesz enjoyed the peak of his political career at European level as a well-known trouble-maker and influencer inside the centre-right European political family in 2015-16. Then, the dominant pro-governmental Hungarian media (which is an entire empire run by a central government foundation today) portrayed the Hungarian prime minister as the new strongman of Europe compared to Angela Merkel’s dangerous politics of open borders. After the referendum on Brexit and Donald Trump’s victory at the US presidential election Orbán prophesied the following 2017 would be the year of rebellion in Europe.

Two years later, as the campaign started, Orbán declared what was at stake at the forthcoming European elections in a simplistic dichotomy: citizens’ choice lies between the supporters of mass (illegal) migration and those who want to stop the influx of non-European strangers. Nevertheless, “a week is a long time in politics” – as Harold Wilson formulated it in 1964. The Orbánisation of Europe seems to be much less a clear and present danger just before the European elections than some years, some months, or some weeks ago. As we know, the political climate has changed again and did not fulfil Orbán’s wishful thinking. Still, the Hungarian prime minister carried on with a strategy having two irons in the fire at the same time. Namely, he used the protecting shield and umbrella of his party’s membership inside the European People’s Party against external

pressures like the ongoing investigations initiated by the European institutions, and, parallel, he enjoyed his new celebrity role as a politician and visionary in the eyes of supporters of radical right wing parties everywhere in Europe. One foot here, with the other there. This politically adventurous trickery, however, proved to be too risky for Orbán just before the European elections came closer.

### 3. The bromance between the European People's Party and its member organisation

Just a couple of months ago, it was a common wisdom to proclaim that the membership of Fidesz in the European People's Party would never be challenged from inside by the European centre-right party family. Also, according to this consent, Viktor Orbán would never jeopardise his influential European position guaranteed by his partisan belonging to the biggest Euro-party and its political group in the European Parliament. The reason for an everlasting co-operation, as the statement was elaborated, is that nobody wants to turn over a win-win situation for both partners in spite of the increasing level of external criticism. According to this pragmatic *Realpolitik* argumentation - a mainly mathematical approach -, the EPP simply needs the numerous votes of Fidesz MEP-s inside the European Parliament to show its strength during the legislative decision-making. Also, the EPP is a wide party family that can cope with radical national organisations to be found on its wings. Moreover, Viktor Orbán still listens to internal critical remarks and is able to change his mind and political line after realising the protest expressed by his party colleagues. "It's probably better to have him inside the tent pissing out, than outside the tent pissing in" – as Lyndon B. Johnson outspokenly characterised his attitudes to John Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI. In other words: the Hungarian leader is an *enfant terrible*, as EPP President Joseph Daul once called him in an interview - but adding that he still liked Orbán. Orbán is the kid of our dog. Actually, quite many politicians inside the political group of the European People's Party agreed that Orbán might be wrong on the rule of law issues, but his views on migration were still "noteworthy". And from a broader perspective, the EPP needs a strong partner (a ruling party) from Hungary (and from Central Europe) in order to avoid an increasing East-West divide – and that is why even significant cultural-historic differences should be tolerated inside the party family.

This static view, however, did not foresee the shift in the relationship that gradually undermined the rationale of a complicated political partnership. As the ongoing deconstruction of the liberal democracy in Hungary caused new and new scandals in the European public debates, a more idealist counter-opinion emerged and spread over inside the EPP's rank and files. According to the centre-right politicians representing this diverging moral approach, what does

not belong together, should fall apart. As the radicalisation of the Orbán-regime and its anti-liberal political measures and rhetoric became even more salient, namely the assumed mitigating impact of the EPP on the political line of Fidesz did not work, the bad-feelings as well as the arguments against the membership of Fidesz gained gradually ground inside the member parties of the family. As the Hungarian leader became more arrogant after winning his third national election in a row in 2018, and Orbán neglected and crossed new and new imaginary red lines drawn by the leadership of his Euro-party, Fidesz finally started to cause more damage to the EPP - not only aesthetically and morally, but even according to pragmatic cost and benefit analyses. The mutual trust has gradually evaporated between the leaders of the EPP and the Hungarian prime minister. Politicians inside the EPP had the increasing impression that Orbán had played fool of them. Finally, in September 2018, the majority of members of the EPP political group voted in favour of triggering Article 7 against Hungary after the plenary debate on the Sargentini report about the state of democracy and the rule of law in Hungary. Orbán's open flirtation with radical right wingers, like Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian Lega, made EPP leaders definitely even more nervous. At the beginning of the European election campaign a new propaganda – so-called “information” - campaign was launched in the country by the Hungarian government portraying Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, and one of the top politicians of the EPP - together with George Soros - as supporters of uncontrolled mass migration to Europe: this humiliation and lie was the last drop in the glass. Loyalty is certainly a crucial value inside any political and non-political organisations. Fidesz – in spite of Orbán's desperate efforts that even included a sort of apology - could not avoid its suspension by the decision of the political assembly of the European People's Party on 20 March 2019.

This relative break-through happened very fast. Just some weeks before, asked if Orbán could be part of the constructive pro-European majority she hopes will form after the European Parliament election, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer said in an interview with Politico on 8 February 2019, the issue presents “a very difficult situation for the EPP”. The new secretary general of the German Christian Democratic Union continued: “There are elements of Viktor Orbán's policies that very much bind us together - for example the concept of the social market economy, of economic policy”, she said. “But there are positions of Fidesz, or Viktor Orbán, on issues such as rule of law and academic independence on which, rightly in my view, the relevant procedure has been launched by the European Union.” Kramp-Karrenbauer added: “As long as Fidesz remains a part of the EPP, however difficult that may be, there is a chance to argue over these positions in a dialogue. And we would deprive ourselves of this opportunity if we were to separate.” Just one and a half month after this cautious and balanced interview, the German party supported the suspension of

Fidesz without any hesitation.

Political development has even accelerated after the decision of the EPP's general assembly. In Hungary, the pro-Fidesz media - in an orchestrated way, presumably directed from the top of the party - urged the party to find a new alliance in the radical right wing camp. Later on, we could read the following sentences on Facebook: "Weber insulted Hungarian voters: Tonight Manfred Weber, as a guest of the German public television, said that if he could only become the president of the European Commission with the votes of FIDESZ, he would not accept the mandate. He added that he does not want to win by right-wing votes, he wants to shape the future of Europe from the middle. This statement is unacceptable. With this Manfred Weber insulted Hungarian voters, who, like other European citizens, will send members to the European Parliament in democratic election. It proved once again that Weber became the hostage of the pro-immigration left." This post was written on 29 March 2019 by Judit Varga, State Secretary for EU Affairs in the Hungarian government, showing that Fidesz did not stop to accuse the EPP – now including the *Spitzenkandidat* of the Euro-party into its targets.

It is hard to imagine how Fidesz might move backwards to be again a regular member party of the centre-right political group after the European elections. The investigation ruled out by the EPP might result in the expulsion of the Hungarian organisation – and Orbán might also decide to leave not waiting for this negative outcome. At least at the moment, the conflict is heading towards the endgame of a long-lasting bromance between Fidesz and the moderate right that started when Fidesz left the Liberal International at the turn of the last century. It is still an open question; however, what would Orbán like to do after the European elections. Does he want to become one of the leaders of a new "Populist International"? His room of manoeuvre can easily shrink in case the rebels of European politics do not reach a break-through at the ballots. A "sacred alliance" of populist/anti-liberal/Eurosceptic parties might be a hard task to accomplish because of the internal differences and rivalries inside the anti-establishment camp. Actually, there are many potential scenarios in the air: soft and hard Eurosceptics, moderate and authoritarian populists/nativists might form two or three political groups in the European Parliament after 26 May 2019.

Orbán's political position inside Europe is now in limbo, but the ambition of the Hungarian Prime Minister will definitely not become smaller after the European elections. His party is waiting for another landslide victory inside Hungary. The Organisation of Europe will not be on the agenda – at least, for a while. As we know, a week is a long time in politics.



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