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The Magyar recipe

A positive form of populism? Péter Magyar's victory shows that if you want to beat illiberal forces, voters' fears must be addressed, not dismissed

Since his election victory, the new Hungarian Prime Minister Péter Magyar has repeatedly been asked the same question at international press conferences: what advice would he give his French, German or Austrian counterparts on dealing with the rise of the Rassemblement National, the AfD or the FPÖ? It is a fair question — for anyone who sees Viktor Orbán's defeat as signalling the end of the 'Illiberal International' is mistaken.

Magyar's answer is strikingly straightforward. Every society, he says, must first understand the real reasons behind these parties' popularity. Across much of Europe, mainstream parties have drifted away from the language people speak and the problems they face in everyday life. Rather than stigmatising their voters, politicians should listen to them, take their concerns seriously and offer better political answers. That is the real point of the so-called 'Magyar recipe'. It is neither spectacular nor new. But that is precisely why it poses such a challenge to many Western parties. Magyar repeatedly points to his own campaign: he travelled across the country, visited almost 700 towns and villages – nearly a quarter of all municipalities in Hungary – and listened in person to hundreds of thousands of people. Work, work, work.

The secret of the Tisza's success lay precisely in the fact that it did not promise anything fundamentally new. The idea that politicians should 'listen to people' and 'take their concerns seriously' seems neither particularly original nor especially controversial. Yet, at least to Austrian and German ears, it has acquired a populist ring. That is because the cultural and political elites in these countries have barricaded themselves behind linguistically constructed taboos. They argue that 'the people cannot be treated as a homogeneous mass' and that one must therefore 'not fall for the exclusionary homogenisation of populism'. They also insist that 'the racist discourse of the far right must not be normalised'. In the process, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that what is labelled as such a discourse may at times also point to real problems and lived experience.

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Such arguments already contain an element of self-exoneration — a release from the obligation to listen. More than that, the prohibition on 'normalising' racist positions can become a moral appeal that relieves politicians of the need to treat voters as adults or engage seriously with their fears, experiences and perspectives. Anyone who fails to express, in politically correct language, that the millions of immigrants who have arrived in recent years have generated cultural, resource-related and security concerns is quickly branded a populist or a racist. This does not mean that every popular form of hostility towards 'migrants' is justified or should be taken up by politicians. But it may mean that it would be more sensible to respond to such concerns not with discursive strategies – reframing, evasion or accusations of racism – but with material responses, whether cultural, resource-related or security-related.

Even protests such as those organised against the AfD party conference in Erfurt ultimately amounted to little more than a public demonstration that the protesters regarded the AfD as extremist and condemned it. That may strengthen group cohesion and reinforce participants' self-image, but given the experience of recent years, it is doubtful that it persuaded even a single AfD sympathiser not to vote for the party. 'Defending democracy' has too often become a self-righteous gesture. It may be sincere, but it is politically ineffective.

The success of the positive form of populism championed by Tisza rested on something else as well: it embodied a different understanding of political work. Rather than constantly exposing the anti-democratic tendencies of Fidesz, Magyar recognised that this had been one of the old opposition's greatest mistakes. Like it or not, that message simply failed to resonate with many people. The people cannot be replaced.

Magyar's conservative upbringing undoubtedly worked to his advantage. He turned a cold shoulder to the cultural elites, to the expectations and coded language of the intellectual circles in Budapest, as well as Vienna, Berlin and elsewhere. He simply did not care, or perhaps he never realised that he was supposed to conform to those expectations. They were not his point of reference. When Fidesz banned Pride last year – precisely in order to lure Magyar onto the symbolic terrain of the urban elites and divide his heterogeneous electorate – he skilfully avoided the trap. He has

done so hundreds of times since. The result is well known.

I can already hear the objections. Where is the line between rejecting the favourite causes of the cultural elites and their politically correct language, which has become detached from ordinary people, on the one hand, and undermining fundamental rights and inciting hatred against minorities on the other? That is precisely the heart of the debate — and, at the same time, the aspect that appears most alien from the perspective of the average voter: the meta-debate about where that line should be drawn. The cultural elites speak of a 'shift to the right' and 'the rightward movement of the boundaries of acceptable discourse', while their critics – not only among AfD or FPÖ voters – speak of shrinking spaces for debate and a crisis of political representation. Instead of lecturing people about democratic theory, Magyar staged democracy in practice: out on the streets, listening to people, engaging with their concerns and transforming the energy of the 50 000 activists organised in the so-called Tisza Islands into a nationwide political mobilisation.

Beyond the firewall

France, Austria and Germany have yet to experience what it means for illiberal forces to hold national power. Their governing parties therefore face the question of how to prevent that from happening. How can they deliver rapid and effective solutions on the economy, the welfare state, infrastructure, migration, education and many other pressing issues before public impatience reaches breaking point? For their voters have diverse, even contradictory expectations of mainstream parties. The people are not homogeneous.

One thing, however, seems certain: invoking the 'fascist threat' is not enough to unite 'the other side', just as it failed to do so in Hungary during the election campaigns of 2014, 2018 and 2022, when different opposition parties formed different coalitions. The desire to remove Orbán from office did not override every other political consideration. One of the most widely debated questions ahead of the elections in the German states of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Saxony-Anhalt is how the mainstream parties might prevent the expected winner from taking power by maintaining the *Brandmauer* ('firewall'). It is no coincidence that the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* chose the following headline for its interview with Magyar: 'Firewalls only make these forces stronger.'

Rather than stigmatising Fidesz voters, he demonstrated the link between people's everyday concerns and the Fidesz government. As a populist leader, he temporarily forged unity among Orbán's opponents. Through

his movement, he gave many people the feeling that politics spoke their language and was concerned with their problems and their lives. How long he will be able to hold this broad electoral coalition together remains uncertain. But there is no doubt that the 'Tisza recipe' worked when it came to defeating the populist Orbán regime and removing it from power through elections. Whether the same recipe can work in Western Europe remains an open question. So too does whether the political elites there are prepared to learn from Hungary. Perhaps they first need to have their own Orbán experience.



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