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How Fidesz and PiS exploit the culture war

They are pushing polarising agendas and devastating socio-economic policies. EU elites only seem to care about the former

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, European governments are being forced to take extreme measures to contain the spread of the virus and limit its impact on the economy. The measures taken are largely unprecedented – country-wide lockdowns and curfews reinforced with extended powers of the executive on the one hand, and economic stimulus packages on the other. In Hungary and Poland, the 'illiberal democratic' governments are seizing this opportunity to continue their special way of hollowing out democracy.

These developments have largely been covered by the international media, albeit in a simplified way. For instance, contrary to the dramatic headlines, the 'Enabling Act' adopted in Hungary, albeit already abused by the government indeed, did not add much to what the executive can already do, given the government coalition's two-thirds majority in Parliament and party loyalists in all institutions, from the Constitutional Court to the Prosecutor's Office. In Poland, meanwhile, the government is fighting to maintain its ability to pass legislation weakening the rule of law as smoothly as possible by retaining its own candidate in the presidential palace, including by pushing for a national ballot in the midst of a pandemic.

In both countries, this 'business as usual' is intensified on the front of the culture war. That's worrying in light of what is materially at stake in the pandemic. The two governments are stirring up the well-known polarising fault lines that have served them well in the past: between government and opposition, and between the majority and any minorities (or 'common sense' vs 'out-of-touch liberals'). These are the developments that cause the most widespread reactions internationally, while a blind eye is turned to the fact that the socio-economic policies being introduced in the two countries are set to cause a wide-scale social catastrophe, far beyond what the crisis makes inevitable.

Culture wars optimised for corona

On 15 April, in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, the Polish Parliament decided to debate two legislative proposals – one on limiting legal access to abortion, the other on criminalising sexuality education. These proposals, which had already made an appearance in the previous parliamentary term, were the subject of widespread popular protests, making the topics inconvenient to the government. As a result, the legislative proposals had become permanently 'stuck' at committee level.

Reactivating the proceedings at a time when all public gatherings are banned, making protesting in the streets nearly impossible, is a particularly cynical move on behalf of the Parliament's majority PiS party. That the two bills were finally sent back to committee for an indefinite period on 16 April seems to have less to do with the creative ways the opposition and grassroots groups found to protest despite the restrictions, than with the fact that the frantic debate they generated had served its purpose.

All the while, legislation on issues of material importance to millions of citizens seems to pass by unnoticed by international public opinion.

Before the reactivation of parliamentary work on these bills, the main topic of discussion had been Poland's presidential election, set to be held on 10 May. Despite the spreading pandemic, the government had held on steadily to its commitment to hold the election on the scheduled date – unsurprisingly, as opposition candidates' inability to campaign further skews the odds in favour of the incumbent, backed by PiS.

Opposition candidates were rightly raising questions about not only the fairness of the competition in these circumstances, but whether holding a public ballot would even be safe. The diversion of attention towards the issue of reproductive rights has bought the government time to further entrench its election plans. The government is now preparing to organise the election through a postal ballot, despite the legally dubious nature of this proposal, which has been found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

Certainly, the PiS government is not simply opportunistic but is actively pushing its long-term conservative agenda: it is an openly Christian conservative party and sympathetic to the claims of the even more right-wing groups, which support them in return for the possibility to push through restrictions on issues such as these. However, it seems PiS has become accustomed to using the issue of reproductive rights for its own

political advantage – as a weapon against the opposition to force it to become distracted.

Ideological misrepresentations

In Hungary, meanwhile, the government seems to be using the exceptional situation to further polarise opposing positions on tired but well-serving fault lines. They put up an omnibus bill that – among many outrageous proposals – contains an amendment that 'seeks to introduce the term "Sex at birth" defined as "the biological sex determined by primary sexual characteristics and chromosomes" to the Civil Registry Act.'

'Sex at birth' would replace 'sex' in the civil registry and, after the bill passes, altering this entry would be forbidden, making it impossible to legally change one's sex in Hungary. In Hungarian there is one word for sex and gender (nem), the difference between 'sex' and 'gender' is expressed by adding an adjective – 'biological' or 'social' sex. This fact contributes to even more misunderstandings and ideological misrepresentations, on both left and right, around the already polysemic terms, e.g. in the recent weeks the term gender was used in liberal media and in politics both to mean gender identity (the person's felt identification) and sex.

The goal of putting this item into the omnibus package seems – if not for catering to the obsessions of the smaller coalition party, the Christian Democrats – less to legislate on the obvious (i.e. one cannot change the sex one had at birth), but to use it later against the opposition as the final proof that they are *for* 'gender ideology'. This move reproduces a culturalist fault line: framed from the liberal side – one is *for* or *against* trans rights, and from the conservative side – one is *for* or *against* gender ideology.

Given the exceptional situation of the pandemic and the range of measures in the omnibus bill, the opposition – despite the fact that many of them hold more nuanced views on the issue than the culture war framing suggests ('one can grant trans people rights without questioning basic biological facts') – was put into a situation where it has no choice but to vote down the whole bill in the week of 4 May. For the government, this will be the proof they wanted: the opposition is for 'gender ideology' and in the midst of a pandemic is acting hysterically about an issue that affects very few people.

Neoliberal 'business as usual'

All the while, legislation on issues of material importance to millions of citizens seems to pass by unnoticed by international public opinion. In response to the crippling effects of the pandemic on the global, European and national economies, the Polish government introduced an 'anti-crisis shield': a package of measures designed to soften that impact. Nevertheless, the package completely fails to address the needs of those most affected – the precarious workers on zero-hours or casual contracts who are not paid unless they *do* work, and temporary and service industry workers. They are expected to receive a paltry one-off payment of €500 from the state. Those who are unemployed and qualify for benefits (only around 17 per cent of the unemployed, according to trade unions) continue to receive the pre-crisis rates of around €185 a month.

Meanwhile, the new measures allow employers to implement pay cuts as well as decrease the amount of rest between shifts – and trade unions already report that some enterprises are applying these measures even if their business has not been impacted. The new legislation also allows the employer to determine where that rest takes place and can therefore instruct nursing home or medical staff to sleep at their workplace between shifts, rather than going home.

East-West inequalities have become clearly visible in the corona-related breakdowns of supply chains for care work and agricultural harvests.

There have further been media reports of projected staff reductions and pay cuts in the government administration, including a 20 per cent staff reduction in the Ministry of Health. Most of the government's extra spending in the 'anti-crisis shield', meanwhile, is set to support the financial sector. The just-announced additional anti-crisis measures promise some further subsidies for workers' salaries, but only for employees in the largest companies; at the same time the new provisions are set to make it easier to terminate employment contracts and lower wages.

In Hungary, the government continues to deepen its social-Darwinist approach. While it expects hundreds of thousands of people to lose their jobs, it does not plan to extend the duration of unemployment benefits – up to approximately €180 for three months, the shortest period in the EU. More than half of Hungarian households have savings for a maximum of two to three months. In the current circumstances, for the government to hold on to its ideology of the 'work-based society' and prime minister Viktor Orbán to state that 'there is no free money' – in

other words, if one does not perform on the labour market, one should not get state help – is therefore particularly cynical.

In a decree issued on 10 April, the government modified the overtime bill without prior consultation, and made it possible for employers to unilaterally apply an even more flexible working timeframe than granted them in the infamous 'slave law'. Also, while opposition parties and local governments are expected to contribute to pandemic mitigation funds, the Fidesz-loyal oligarchs are exempt from sharing the burden.

A lack of attention to economic measures

Perhaps not surprisingly, the developments relating to the ruthless economic measures in Hungary and Poland do not receive the same amount of attention as the culture wars waged by their governments. While the proposals to restrict reproductive rights in Poland and the new trans regulation in Hungary met with widespread opposition from EU policymakers – MEPs wrote to the Polish parliament and the Hungarian government to protest the developments – there was no similar reaction to the economic measures.

Indeed, it would appear that the social catastrophe orchestrated by Poland and Hungary is not out of line with the 'European values'. The lack of provisions for the lower classes of these countries is in fact beneficial for the core EU countries who continue profiting from their cheap labour force – which, now more than ever, is clearly essential to the functioning of their own economies.

East-West inequalities have become clearly visible in the corona-related breakdowns of supply chains for care work and agricultural harvests. What merits the outrage of the EU and Western elite in Poland and Hungary, and what does not, is another tell-tale sign of the hypocrisy behind the terms 'solidarity' and 'European values'. If these words are to mean anything, the socio-economic catastrophe in the making in those countries should be urgently addressed too.



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