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Viktor Orbán's Social Darwinism

Orbán's rule by decree isn't just an opportune power grab. It should help sustain his socio-economic model during a crisis

On 30 March, Hungary's parliament passed a law which allows the nationalist government to rule by decree. International news outlets and commentators were quick to interpret the move as the final nail in Hungary's moribund democracy. But Hungary ceased to be a functioning democracy already before the current crisis. As Bea Bakó rightly argues, Orbán has de facto ruled by decree for 10 years now. The legislature functions as a rubber-stamp parliament, with the ruling Fidesz party's MPs passing motions without substantial debate (in the dead of the night, if necessary) and the president of the republic faithfully signing them into law.

The experience of living in a Potemkin democracy and the understanding that most of Orbán's grand moves should be viewed as political theatre has informed domestic reactions to the latest emergency. Much of the commentary on social media suggests that there isn't anything that Orbán can do now, which he could not do before (although newly introduced jail terms for spreading misinformation can now be used to silence critics).

Pundits have argued that Orbán's primary aim was to set a trap for the opposition. Their argument goes that he deliberately set impossible conditions, such as refusing to put a time limit on the state of emergency, so that opposition parties would be compelled to vote against its extension. Orbán could then claim that his opponents were seeking to obstruct his effort to protect Hungarians, allowing him to recycle the tired but well-entrenched cliché of an 'unpatriotic' opposition.

The struggle to control the narrative is clearly a key preoccupation of governments of all stripes at the moment, so this argument carries weight. What's more, the current crisis is clearly opportune for nationalist strongmen looking to amass symbolic capital by demonstrating forceful leadership.

And yet this effort to interpret the emergency legislation as a clever move of political chess suffers from two weaknesses. The first is that it relies on experience gained from politics in normal times, largely disregarding the fact that we are dealing with crisis situation.

The government's bowing to public pressure to close schools and its backtracking on a decision to strip elected mayors of autonomy after pressure from Fidesz's own mayors suggests that public opinion is less controllable and otherwise loyal party cadres less reliable in moments of crisis. Furthermore, foreign and domestic commentators have both failed to discern a link between the emergency legislation and the government's strategy for managing the corona crisis.

Fidesz's Social Darwinism

The Hungarian state's response stands out in the EU with the small war chest (fiscal measures worth less than 1 per cent of GDP) set aside to fight the crisis and the general thrust of measures. The national bank and the government followed in the footsteps of other European countries when on 7 April their representatives announced that companies would be offered cheap credit and tax holidays. But the Hungarian state has so far offered companies far less support than regional counterparts to protect jobs, and it has been even less generous toward citizens and local municipalities.

Although 4,000 Hungarians are losing their jobs every day (a large number in a country of 10 million), the government has so far not done anything to help them besides freezing the payment of private mortgages. In particular, it has refused to increase the duration of unemployment insurance, which citizens can only access for 90 days (the shortest duration in the EU) or to raise the universal family allowance (which is around €40 per child). And instead of rushing to support municipalities that have been flooded by requests for urgent social assistance, the government stripped them of further revenues.

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politicians.

The first is the government's aversion towards unbalanced budgets and state debt. The explanation offered for proposing a limited crisis mitigation package was that Hungary needed to rely on its own resources to tackle the crisis. This is in line with Fidesz's long-term political and economic goals of reducing the level of state debt, limiting Hungary's exposure to foreign creditors and avoiding by all means a repeat of its predecessor's 'IMF fiasco'.

The second premise is that the social model Fidesz has built must be upheld at all cost. Offering 'free money' to the unemployed would on Orbán's view be tantamount to reinforcing a culture of deservingness. It would also undermine the 'work-based society', which he portrayed as an alternative to the West European welfare state.

In sum, Orbán is not prepared to offer a rescue package on par with the economic and social toll of the pandemic. And he is determined to uphold the exploitative 'growth machine' (a combination of small taxes, rampant deregulation and an increasingly downsized 'illfare state'), which is the most important source of his legitimacy. The explanation Orbán offered to defend his government's approach – 'there is no free money' – appears particularly cynical in light of the fact that loyal oligarchs, who have received billions of euros in European and state subsidies, have not been asked to contribute to the 'common effort' to defend Hungary. This ruthless Social Darwinism – no free lunch for the destitute – has been masked with Orbán's counterfactual promise to 'leave no Hungarian behind'.

Orbán's three worries

When considered in this light, the emergency legislation appears as a strategic move to cushion the executive as much as possible from possible shifts in public opinion and pressure from elected politicians. More particularly, the move allows Orbán to address three risks.

First, it eliminates the risk of losing his parliamentary supermajority in a period of crisis. It would be enough for one or two Fidesz MPs to fall sick for this to happen. The loss of his supermajority would be perceived as a sign of Orbán's weakness and it could also sow confusion among his supporters. It would also mean that Fidesz would have to rely on the opposition to amend key legislation, and this could also undermine Orbán's carefully crafted image of the 'nation's savior'.

Second, rule by decree erases the possibility of MPs influencing policy.

One particularly acute problem the government is facing at the moment is that the grand narratives of the 'refugee crisis', 'anti-Sorosism' and the 'cosmopolitan Brussels elite' (which together project the image of a nation being simultaneously threatened by the influx of refugees and the unholy alliance of George Soros and the European Commission) have lost much of their clout in the current crisis.

Although in the early days of the pandemic Orbán made an effort to connect Covid-19 to Muslim immigration, this fell on deaf ears as it became clear that the main sources of risk were not Iranian students but Hungarians returning from Italy and Austria. The weakening power of propaganda means that public opinion is less controllable and more erratic than before. The latter increases the probability of the public piling pressure on politicians to implement policies that expand the budget deficit or go against Fidesz's socio-economic doctrine. Cutting MPs out of the picture does not fully eradicate this risk, but it does mitigate it.

Finally, the state of emergency offers a legal avenue for the introduction of truly exceptional measures in case the latter were to become necessary. At the moment, this still appears a distant possibility. But if the crisis were to last, that could bring Hungary's export-dependent economy to its knees. In such a situation, Orbán would have the option of deploying the police and the military to maintain public order and prevent mass looting and/or protest, instead of opening the state's coffers to those in need. This would, of course, amount to a massive slide towards authoritarianism, even by Hungarian standards.

Nevertheless, this would be in line with the gradual roll-out of institutional authoritarianism, which has weakened the political and civic opposition and allowed Fidesz to overcome a minor political crisis triggered by the rewriting of the labour code in 2018. Ruling by decree could thus help Fidesz sustain the Social Darwinist socio-economic model, which it has been building since 2010. It could also allow Orbán to preempt the kind of popular revolt, which consumed his left-liberal predecessor during the last big economic downturn.



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