**Populist myths and ethno-nationalist fears in Hungary**

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**Introduction**

The ruling Hungarian Civic Alliance (*Fidesz*) and its coalition partner, the Christian Democratic People’s Party *(KDNP*), have been in power in Hungary since 2010. Victor Orbán has been Prime Minister throughout this period. In this chapter we ask how Fidesz and Orbán have mobilised political support and gained a two-thirds parliamentary majority in Hungary. What specific factors have contributed to Fidesz’s capacity to secure such popular consent? We explore some of the ideological and discursive work undertaken in support of Fidesz’s project. The run-up to the European Parliamentary election of 2019 offers examples of how Fidesz discourse was used in various media forms to rally support. In particular, Fidesz has constructed a narrative of Hungarian history that provides an authority based on tradition and reverence for a sacred and shared national past. The narrative is intercut with discourses of Hungarian *exceptionalism*, the *victimisation* of Hungary, and the conviction that *treachery* (internal and foreign) threatens Hungary’s present circumstances. These form a composite discourse from which Fidesz claims to embody the interests of the Hungarian nation. The assertion, typical of populist-right parties, is that nation, government and Fidesz itself are indivisible. Its description of its own regime as the so-called ‘System of National Cooperation’ (NER) is one manifestation of an ideological compact that permeates Hungarian political and cultural life (Batory, 2016).Traditional and contemporary media technologies – billboards and social media - have been widely deployed to propagate the Fidesz message.

We recognise that precisely what counts as populism or ‘the right’ implies diverse positions with shifting political, ideological and conceptual boundaries. Populism claims to speak for ‘the people’ (itself a discursive construction) against the power of established elites. Essentially, “populism” denotes *forms* of political practice rather than content. However, precise definition of the right or far-right is problematic (Krekó, 2017). These ideas, practices and groups are constituted in shifting and locally specific combinations, neither static nor inert. To appear relevant, the substantive content of right or far-right politics must speak to local audiences. In Hungary, these ideas can be understood as responses to the consequences of post-communist social change and a global neo-liberal order and expressed in anxieties about the role of the nation-state in late modernity.

However, despite definitional problems, there is a shared substantive base that underlies any plausible definition of populist-right/far-right ideology. These include xenophobia, an ethno-nationalism which privileges both the nation state and ‘the people’ and an authoritarianism entailing the centralisation of political power under strong leadership. The basic ideas which compose Fidesz discourse are historically rooted in Hungarian culture and, for some, suggest the risk of a slide into fascism or post-fascism (Tamás, 2013, 24).

Emerging from student activism in the 1990s and governing Hungary between 1998 and 2002, Fidesz’s subsequent failures in the national elections of 2002 and 2006 (though still achieving 41% and 42% of the vote respectively) signalled that a change of political focus was necessary. Scandal in the then-governing socialist party and the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis facilitated this shift to a populist right position. Fidesz’s ethno-nationalism (embodied in anti-migrant and anti-Roma discourse) seems calculated to bolster its support from voters who might find popular racism and anti-migrant sentiments persuasive. The European migration crisis of 2015 heralded the most radical (and opportunistic) change for Fidesz’s policies and diverted attention from government corruption, poor levels of health and education, decaying public services and so on.

This chapter is structured in the following way. First, we contextualise the present political situation in Hungary and Fidesz’s place within it. We go on to outline the broad media environment in Hungary. We then offer an analysis and discussion of Fidesz’s discursive work in recruiting political support, drawing on data from the run-up to the 2019 European parliamentary election. Our focus is on the juxtaposition of and interplay between older and newer technologies and how these have been harnessed to key political messages in Fidesz’s successful mobilization of support. In doing this, we examine two technologies used during the run-up to that election: the campaign billboard and campaign Facebook posts. Finally, we offer some brief conclusions.

**Hungary and Fidesz**

Hungary lies in central Europe, a region shaped by feudalism, *“… semi-peripheral gentry capitalist and autocratic traditions*” (Krausz, 2019). In Hungary these have fostered an historically-rooted conservative worldview especially marked in rural and small city areas of the country. Until 1918 Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The 1920 Trianon Peace Treaty, signed at Versailles, led to the loss of two thirds of Hungary’s population and territory to neighbouring states. Trianon remains a symbolically powerful and justified grievance in Hungarian collective memory. During the inter-war years a period of authoritarian ‘Christian nationalism’ flourished, and a symbiotic relationship formed between fascist groups and the regime of the Regent, Miklos Horthy.[[1]](#endnote-1) An openly fascist government collaborated with the Nazis prior to and during their occupation of Hungary in 1944. This culminated in the deportation of some 600,000 Jewish Hungarians to Nazi extermination camps. There is evidence of resilient anti-Semitism and anti-Roma prejudice in Hungary (EVZ, 2018, Hann and Róna, 2019). Between 1945 and 1989, Hungary was situated in the Soviet communist sphere of influence. The country acceded to the EU in 2004 and is a member of the ‘Visegrad 4’, a political alliance with Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Fidesz has shifted from an original 1990s conservativism to a populist-right position. It has colonised political territory hitherto the terrain of Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary), currently the largest opposition party in the Hungarian parliament. Jobbik has a history of neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic and anti-Roma activity, but has recently moved towards the political centre. Its principal significance, and that of its extremist offshoot Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Homeland Movement), has been a broad dissemination of rightist political discourse in Hungary.[[2]](#endnote-2) Jobbik (and Mi Hazánk Mozgalom) continues to be influential locally and in relation to distinct local events. Their propagation of discourses of “gypsy crime” and “gypsy terror”, for example, and their use of these powerful anti-Roma discourses and signifiers as framing devices in recent cases of street violence have achieved high profile press coverage. Fidesz has similarly reflected negative representations of Roma people.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, Fidesz uses surrogates in the distribution of rightist discourse. Arguably, it is in Fidesz’s interests for ‘extremist’ politicians or right-wing journalists to perpetuate racist or anti-migrant discourse throughout a hybridised media landscape. Those agents undertake the discursive dirty-work that might discredit Fidesz politicians, but from which the latter can draw political capital.

Fidesz has been significantly more influential than Jobbik in far-right discourse becoming normative in Hungary. Such discourse is increasingly *respectable* rather than extremist, the latter depiction being readily attached to Jobbik. Respect entails judgements of moral legitimacy. Fidesz’s widely disseminated version of Hungarian ethno-nationalism implies an authentic, singular and patriotic national identity central to Fidesz politics and policy around which Fidesz seeks to solidify its support. One significant example of this is the strong anti-migrant sentiments expressed by Hungarians (European Commission, 2018).

According to former Fidesz MEP György Schöpflin (regarded by some as a Fidesz intellectual) Fidesz has sought to develop a Hungarian state systematically cleansed of Budapest’s left-liberal “*comprador elite*” and organised around a communitarianism eschewing individual rights in favour of duty*“…conservatism and Christian Democracy, solidarity, family, nationhood and statehood … in tune with historically inherited traditions, social aspirations and democracy”* andproclaiming *“…the importance of the state as an instrument of solidarity, redistribution and security”* (2013, 13). This signals resistance to western liberalism, especially policies associated with inward migration, multiculturalism and what Fidesz refers to as ‘gender ideology’. Despite recurrent denunciation of ‘globalism’, Fidesz has promoted neo-liberal economic liberalisation, flexible labour markets, workfare and diminished welfare and social protections. Hungary is characterised by austerity, inequality and a precarious labour market (Scheiring, 2020).

Christianity and ‘the nation’ are central to Fidesz politics, “*Christian culture… is anti-immigration… (and)… rests on the foundations of the Christian family model*” (Orbán, 2018b), constituting the principal elements of Orbán’s so-called ‘illiberal democracy’ in which Fidesz has positioned itself as the protector of Christian Europe. Ironically, a minority of Hungarians regard themselves as religious (Pew Research Centre, 2019) but Christianity is formally acknowledged in the 2011 Constitution (the ‘Fundamental Law of Hungary’). Christianity is deployed as a legitimating marker, affirming that Hungary represents authentic European values in contrast to a multi-cultural and, implicitly, ‘lost’ West. A “paganized” (Ádám and Bozóki, 2019, 102) and nominal Christianity, rehearsing the inter-war Horthy regime’s ‘Christian nationalism’, assumes a high profile in Fidesz discourse.

Fidesz’s neo-liberal economics has supported the development of a ‘national bourgeoisie’ – an ‘oligarchy’ - benefiting extensively from state contracts. Following Weber, Szelényi (2015, 50) analyses Fidesz’s prebendalist system (a form of political patronage) which distributes opportunities for capital accumulation to Fidesz associates. They, in turn, serve Fidesz’s political interests. This is especially important in relation to media ownership in Hungary. Allies occupy key roles in elements of the Hungarian state apparatus which, in classical democracies, are intended to counter-balance the powers of the political executive. These include the constitutional court, the state audit office, the office of the ombudsman, and the competition authority (Kornai, 2015, 281), as well as the National Bank, media, sports, arts and cultural institutions. Some analysts suggest Fidesz has achieved state capture (Fazekas and Tóth, 2016), even describing contemporary Hungary as a ‘post-communist Mafia state’ where public interests are subordinated to private interests, the state becoming a *“…privatised form of parasite state*” (Magyar, 2016). In 2018 Hungary was identified as the 26th most corrupt of the 28 EU Member States (Transparency International, 2019).

Hungary has attracted international censure for its erosion of civil liberties, academic freedom, the rule of law and judicial independence, corruption and, particularly, its recent response to refugees and asylum seekers. Freedom House has described Hungary as “partly free”, the only country in the EU to attract such a classification (Freedom House, 2019). An increasingly centralising and autocratic Hungarian polity lies somewhere between dictatorship and democracy (Kornai, 2015).

Fidesz gained a two-thirds parliamentary ‘super-majority’ in Hungary’s 2018 national election, with 133 seats from 199 achieved from about 49% of votes cast on a turnout of 70%. In the 2019 European Parliamentary election Fidesz achieved about 52% of the vote, 13 seats from 21, on a turnout of 44%. Both results demonstrate Fidesz’s political power and its ability to mobilize consistent support although consistent allegations of wide-ranging electoral irregularities have been made.[[4]](#endnote-4) In achieving a near political hegemony Fidesz has successfully articulated its own interests with those of the rural and urban working-class, parts of the middle-class, the Hungarian business class as well as transnational capital. Fidesz’s electoral support emerges as a complex amalgam of generally older, nominally Christian, small and medium size town dwellers, moderate conservatives and some middle-class voters many of whom felt abandoned in the social disintegration following the 2008 financial crisis in Hungary (Republikon, 2015). In another study (Juhász, 2017), Fidesz voters reflected Hungary’s gender profile (56% of Fidesz voters women, 44% men) and blue/white collar employment status (64% and 36% of Fidesz voters respectively). Fidesz voters are concentrated in sections of population with vocational certificates/high school diplomas (33% and 34% of Fidesz voters respectively). Broadly, this reflects Hungary’s population profile, suggesting the party’s extensive support.

**Hungarian media and political mobilisation**

For Anderson (1991), the nation is produced as an *imagined* political community through common language and the printed word. These form the unifying bonds of nation. Constructing such an imagined community in Hungary entwines ideological integration and identification with the national state, Christianity, populism and representations of the ‘good Hungarian’ (Fekete, 2016), in the attempt to create a national hegemony. Hungarian media and propaganda mechanisms (broadcast, digital and print news media, national consultations, billboards, advertisements, social media, etc.) create a hybrid media landscape, juxtaposing older and newer technologies (Chadwick, 2017).

Chadwick’s work is helpful here in explaining how formations, reconfigurations and interplay of old and new media are used in political communication and mobilisation. He argues that old and new media practices are coexistent and interdependent. The diversification of political communication strategies could be seen to erode public trust in political elites and democratic institutions. Citizen-activists, loyal party members and casual users can now become knowledge producers *and* consumers. However, Chadwick argues that political elites have begun to adapt to these shifts, attempting to push their agendas both on and offline. The resulting mixed media-logics include a renewal of old media systems such as broadcast and print, alongside attempts to utilise influential platforms such as Facebook.

A diversity of media forms underlies Fidesz’s mobilisation of political support. The party’s media practices extend through regional newspapers, television and radio to billboards, online news sites and social media platforms. While audiences inevitably engage differently with these formats and messages, a unity of campaign message and powerful evocation of nation, identity and *the Other* runs across these media forms. We explore two ends of this ‘hybrid media’ spectrum: Fidesz’ use of billboards and social media sites in mobilising key political messages.

Although the Hungarian media environment appears diverse, one estimate puts Fidesz-friendly ownership at 78% (Mérték Media Monitor, 2018). This is consolidated under the rubric of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), some 400 media outlets. KESMA is subject neither to competition rules nor independent scrutiny. As Bátorfy and Urbán note, Hungary shows governments “…*can generate pseudo-diversity as the state uses its unlimited access to state resources to disburse funds among private owners who are loyal to the government in exchange for propaganda*” (2019, 47). Despite some diversity, state and some non-state television channels and daily newspapers remain loyal to Fidesz.

Television remains the most important source of political information in Hungary (Eurostat, 2017; Mérték Media Monitor, 2018) other than for young people who increasingly rely on social media (NDI, 2018). According to Eurostat, Hungary has the highest number of internet users (83%) amongst the 16-74-age group in EU member states with 97% of Hungarians using social network platforms (Eurostat, 2018). The Fidesz ‘media juggernaut’ (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018, 46) overshadows state, national, regional and online media and is a key site for securing ideological dominance. Traditional media forms such as billboards, many owned by Fidesz associates and covering the country at election times, are also well-funded propaganda tools.[[5]](#endnote-5)

As a platform for political mobilisation, social media is vital. It enables new patterns of engagement, increased visibility of key campaigning messages and the development of a stronger forum for smaller political parties (Lilleker et al, 2017; Wilkin et al, 2015; Bene, 2017; Bene, 2018). However, as traditional media remain influential in determining voter intentions, social media sources like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram occupy supplementary positions within a broader hybrid strategy (Klinger & Russman, 2017).

The influence of Facebook in shaping elections and spreading ‘fake’ viral news has received much research attention (Chadwick, 2017; Goździak & Márton, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Bene notes that peer engagement and sharing of political posts reinforces existing political affiliations rather than reaching out to new potential supporters (Bene 2017; 2018). Bíró-Nagy et al (2016) argue that the links and networks between ‘likes’ on Hungarian Facebook posts demonstrate tightly segregated and insular patterns of use, with little cross-engagement between political posts and party supporters. This suggests that the ‘traditional’ tools of political mobilisation remain influential and are interwoven with online forms in attracting support (Klinger & Russman, 2017; Lilleker et al 2017).

In Hungary, party political engagement is mobilised through a broad web of campaign material spreading a common message across TV and radio advertisements, newspapers, mass mailings, citizen consultations and billboards. This inter-textual media coverage promotes an agenda that amplifies Fidesz core messages when reaching out to the electorate (Krekó & Enyedi 2018). Key campaign messages and slogans remain remarkably consistent with little apparent attempt at segmenting the audience or reaching out to potential Fidesz voters. Indeed, the “*tilted electoral playing field”* for Fidesz is also founded on *“genuine support from the people”* (ibid, 41) and a large existing voter base. Fidesz remains dominant, its position consolidated through state-media support and an expansive pro-government oligarchic media network.

**Fidesz: using the migration crisis**

We now consider Fidesz’s resurgence in the last five years, drawing on analysis of political messaging from billboard campaigns and social media during that period. During the run up to the 2019 European Parliamentary election we monitored the official Fidesz Facebook and Twitter feeds, identifying key campaign messages and attempts to distribute and engage with an ethno-nationalist agenda.

Here, billboards and Facebook are platforms for discourse, important media texts that seek to mobilise political approval. They contain visual and textual symbols that create representations of key political actors, attract identification and form relations between audiences and politicians (Fairclough, 1995, 5). Following Laclau (1977, 2005), we understand the political mobilisation process as a form of national populist ‘mythmaking’ that operates in Fidesz’s hegemonic interests. Laclau’s post-Gramscian theorization clearly shows how populism works as a discursive process in shaping political identification. Laclau identifies the significance of a strong and popular leader able to rescue the nation, and notes that in order to mobilise support it is important to develop an ‘us’ (the people) and a ‘them’. In Hungary, the populist ‘us’ is constructed as a fictive, ethnically ‘pure’ kin-nation; truly *Magyar* and Christian. The ‘Others’ (non-Magyar, Roma, Muslims, refugees, globalists, the UN, the EU or George Soros[[6]](#endnote-6)) are represented as a corrosive threat to the enduring culture of the Hungarian nation.

We share methodological aspects of Balzacq’s (2005) discursive view of *securitization,* a process that articulates audiences, contexts and power. Existential threats to key audiences are defined by powerful actors, who argue that they are amenable to political intervention. Fidesz has comprehensively securitized migration discourse in Hungary, categorising migration as a fundamental threat to Hungarian life and identity, deploying a range of xenophobic discursive practices, border closures and other deterrents that have reinforced resistance to migration and secured popular consent for increasing authoritarianism. Threats from migration resonate with historic anxieties about national annihilation “*by alien, rootless state powers”*. Such anxiety has a history of fomenting an “*anti-democratic nationalism*” across East and Central Europe, in which “*oppressive powers*… *search for the ‘hirelings’ of the enemy, the ‘traitors’*…“ (Bibó, 1946, 149-152). The 2015 European migration crisis provided rich material on which Fidesz’s then weakening political position was reversed.[[7]](#endnote-7) In 2015, billboards positioning Fidesz as the protector of the nation quickly covered the country. Ironically, though ostensibly targeting migrants, their texts were in Hungarian, clearly aimed at domestic audiences and citing key threats to the security of the nation and its members. ‘*If you come to Hungary you should respect our culture*’ and ‘*If you come to Hungary don’t take Hungarians’ jobs’*.

Billboard and social media campaigns subsequently constructed a composite Fidesz discourse about threats from migration, constituting a ‘common sense’ that has pervaded Hungarian culture. Three elements of this discourse are evident. First, a *Hungarian exceptionalism*, second, the imputed *victimisation* of Hungary and its people and, third, accusations of *treachery*. We consider these in turn.

***Hungarian exceptionalism***

Nationalism invariably claims the nation’s exceptional status or identity. National belonging is evoked through a series of historical ‘us’ and ‘them’ binaries (Goździak & Márton, 2018): *Christian/Muslim, native/migrant, civilised/barbarian,* etc. In this context exceptionalism entails an almost metaphysical claim that the spirit of the Hungarian people is somehow beyond the norm, incomparable and, implicitly, superior to *unexceptional others*. Orbán recurrently invokes Hungarian uniqueness, citing its linguistic and cultural isolation and marking some predestined duty. “*… the Hungarian people’s most valuable asset is that which sets it apart from all others. If we were the same as others, what purpose would we serve in the world and on what grounds could we seek God’s assistance in the face of our opponents*?” (Orbán, 2015).

Hungary’s unique status is consistently evoked in relation to a series of others, construed as “*our opponents*”, part of boundary setting and distancing ’us’ “… from all others”. This was materialised in 2015 when a 500 kilometre fence, patrolled by some 12,000 soldiers, police and guards was constructed on Hungary’s southern border. The steel and barbed wire fence, designed to prevent refugees crossing Hungary’s borders, denotes inside and outside, the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ and symbolises Hungary’s Christian presence on European terrain. “*When we draw the boundaries of our identity, we mark out Christian culture as the source of our pride”* (Orbán, 2017). The text in the following 2016 poster, part of a series focusing on government reforms, states, *‘We don’t want illegal immigrants!’.*

< Image 1 near here>

The young woman in the poster, white, casually dressed and seemingly representing contemporary Hungary, maintains eye-contact and connection with the viewer. Ironically, she attempts to symbolically reference a youthful constituency, and not typical Fidesz voters. The conjugation of the verb in the text signifies the young woman is speaking on behalf of ‘we’, an emotional appeal for identification with her (as representative) and the wider ‘raced’ kin-nation. Projecting ‘we’ she symbolises a ‘good’ Hungarian, white, Christian woman whose duty is the reproduction of the ethnically pure and *exceptional* kin-nation, central to Fidesz discourse. As Orbánput it *“… we don’t want to become a mixed country; we don’t want migration; we want to preserve our security; and even without migrants we will be able to sustain Hungary’s biological future through our family policy*” (Orbán, 2019b).

Fidesz’s narrative forgets or ignores Europe’s non-Christian heritage in classical culture. Hungary’s multi-ethnic history and segments of its present and non-Christian populations are erased by this historical amnesia that privileges an exclusionary identity defined in historico-ethno-biological and Christian terms, reliant on an illusory sense of ethno-national purity (Goździak & Márton, 2018).

In the run up to the 2019 EP election, social media threads framed concerns about the declining Hungarian population[[8]](#endnote-8) due to a low birth rate (1.55 births per woman in 2018, Eurostat, 2020), an ageing population and youth emigration. Fidesz’s counter-immigration pronatalist policy stance promotes an ethno-nationalist, ‘family friendly’ agenda which includes tax breaks and credit deals for the upper middle-classes who already benefit from a ‘flat-tax’ regime. Campaign messages emphasize the true ‘Magyar’ (non-Roma)[[9]](#endnote-9) woman as wife, mother and producer of future citizens, suggesting the gendered and ethnicised nature of the Fidesz project. Pronatalism draws its power from the idea “*… that the members of a nation are part of an extended family, ultimately united by ties of blood”* (Muller 2008, 20). It emphasises the imagined community of the kin-nation in order to preserve and affirm an exceptional and authentic national identity (Yuval-Davis, 1997; King, 2002; Brown & Ferree, 2005). Pronatalist programmes are not new in Eastern Europe. From the mid-20th century communist states followed such policy in response to declining fertility, and Hungary has engaged with pronatalism since then (McIntyre, 1975). Recently, nationalist anxieties have framed pronatalism in terms of women’s duty to the *exceptional* Hungarian nation and its biological and cultural reproduction. Fidesz ideology has configured Hungarian responses to declining population as integral to its anti-immigration family policy. This resonates with earlier twentieth-century fascist and other authoritarian regimes using women’s fertility as a driver of ethno-national success.

A series of posts on Fidesz’s official Facebook account during the 2019 EP election reflects this.

*‘God bless Hungarian mothers!’ (14th May, 2019).*

*‘We stand by Hungarian families, and we will protect and support them with every possible means.’ (15th May, 2019).*

*‘Instead of immigration, the future of Europe should be based on good family policy.’*

*(17th May, 2019).*

Throughout the election, Fidesz’s ethnicised pronatalist agenda was contrasted with unwanted immigration and presented in social media as a means of revitalising the exceptional nation.

***Victimhood***

Victimisation signifies “…*harm perpetrated against a person or group, and victimhood as a form of collective identity based on that harm”* (Jacoby, 2015, 513). Fidesz mythmaking casts Hungary as the victim of global forces and supra-national powers. It outlines defensive action necessary to preserve national and cultural integrity. External threats menace autonomy and sovereignty and are discursively framed to imply a threat to ‘the Hungarian people’ whose linguistic, cultural and ethnic integrity are jeopardised by liberalism, sexual politics or feminism. Victimhood permeates a Hungarian culture currently represented as under siege from hostile forces: globalization, transnational institutions like the UN and EU, multi-culturalism and, especially, migration.

Hungarian victimhood is invariably framed in terms of loss and harm, especially with reference to the Trianon Treaty of 1920 or the virtually continuous successive occupation of Hungary since the sixteenth century by the Turks, Austrians, Nazis and Soviets. For Fidesz, an authoritarian EU similarly seeks to undermine an independent and sovereign Hungary. EU accession was accompanied by sometimes disparaging representations of ‘eastern Europeans’ in western media and public opinion, encouraging a perception of a second-class European citizenship. Some analysts argue this is a consequence of failed attempts by central and east European states to imitate western liberal democracies, leading to humiliation and fuelling a victimhood narrative (Krastev and Holmes, 2018, 118). Cultural texts, including those of the billboards identified in this chapter, institutionalise and reproduce the narrative.

Referring to inward migration as a question of national security, in which Hungary becomes the victim of terrorism, Orbán warned“… *migration has become the trojan horse of terrorism, and the discourse of liberal political correctness is unable to understand the real dangers of migration "* (Origo, 2017)*.* The following image of an election poster widely displayed on billboards across the country in 2018 signals Hungary as the potential victim of mass migration. This is symbolised by the apparently unending line of threatening, mainly male and seemingly dystopian figures, and contrasts with the innocence and hopefulness of the young woman in Image 1. The image appears cynically intended to alarm a population with little recent experience of inward migration.[[10]](#endnote-10) It establishes a clear ‘us’ and ‘them’ and adds the ‘red-for-danger’ injunction to ‘Stop’ them.[[11]](#endnote-11)

<Image 2 near here>

During the 2019 EP election campaign, a triple threat emerged in social media posts. The threat linked EU, global and transnational political actors and migrant groups, portraying them as overwhelming Hungarian culture and evoking the alleged threat of terrorism from which Hungarians and Hungary would be potential victims. A Fidesz Facebook post from April 2019 highlights how these concerns are discursively linked.

*'Victor Orbán’s 7-point program is especially current now… Brussels only increases migration and the terror threat to Europe.’ (25th April, 2019).*

The 7-point programme forms a securitised approach to migration including excluding migrants from EU territory without valid identity papers, no compulsory relocation of migrants in any EU state and compulsory return to countries of origin. This post was followed with:

*‘After the European Parliament elections, we must return to the protection of external borders, the Europe of nation states’ (26th April, 2019).*

The post interlaces the EU, the migrant crisis, and an underlying fear of ‘terror’ in familiar form, inseparable from the logic of nationalised Hungarian victimhood. The terror threat emerges from religious, social and cultural *Others*; from illegal and economic migrants, like those in Image 2, represented as jeopardising Hungarian (and European) security and society. Ironically, this sense of dread is palpable in media and public discourse despite the almost complete absence of migrant communities in Hungary. State-media, a crucial relay in the dissemination of Fidesz propaganda, sustains this in regular news stories of migrants massing in Turkey or Greece, on the border with Serbia, and digging tunnels under or breaking through the border fence.

***Treachery***

Resentment over others’ treachery is the third central feature of Fidesz discourse. The treaty of Trianon stands as the seminal treacherous act against Hungary. Collective memory of Trianon has been carefully managed as a *“…clear symbolic system, which communicated a whole universe of national resentment*” (Kovács, 2016, 528).[[12]](#endnote-12) Resentment is a highly mobile force that can be easily manipulated and whose focus can be rapidly shifted. Fidesz have constructed George Soros as a contemporary and high-profile target of resentment, the necessary (Jewish) counter to the sanctified figure of Orbán. Soros is vilified as traitor to Hungary for his so-called ‘Soros Plan’,[[13]](#endnote-13) and his ‘Soros network’ (more recently the ‘Soros orchestra’), which allegedly manipulates EU politicians, EU policy and NGOs in an effort to promote migration. Underlying Soros’s vilification is a strong notion of conspiracy invoking the allegedly covert entry of Soros agents into institutions like the UN, the EU and a range of Europe and Hungary-based NGOs. This narrative relies on familiar, coded anti-Semitic tropes, vigorously protested by Hungarian Jewish organisations, which incorporate the idea that Soros seeks to undermine the government and aspirations of the Hungarian people. Soros is regularly portrayed by Fidesz-sympathetic media as a globalist traitor to his homeland.

The following, grinning, Soros image from 2017 cautions Hungarians not to let Soros *“have the last laugh”* and that *“99% reject illegal immigration”.* Soros is represented here as the artful trickster, sneering at those about to be fooled by his deception. Image 3 (and Image 4 below) represent Soros as cultural enemy and Jewish *other*. Existing extensive anti-Semitism in Hungary both contribute to and inform such propaganda. The text implicitly warns ‘us’, the readers, of the danger of Soros. ‘We’ are his potential victims. Viewed in conjunction with Image 2 (representing impending migration), the impact of image 3 is especially powerful.

<Image 3 near here>

For Fidesz, Soros’s goal is “… *transforming Europe and moving it towards a post-Christian and post-national era…”* (Orbán, 2018b). Described as ‘open society’ ideologue and predatory capitalist (Schmidt, 2017), Soros’s alleged collusion with ‘Brussels’ is a potent recurring symbol in Hungary. Image 4 from a 2019 EP election poster, insinuates that the then European Commission President Juncker was either collaborating with Soros or that Soros was behind Juncker (*literally* so in this image) and the EU’s plans. It states, ‘*you too have a right to know what Brussels is doing*’. The Brussels-Soros conspiracy to replace Christian culture with Western multiculturalism, the essence of the so-called Soros Plan, is constantly rehearsed in Fidesz propaganda. In a population with little experience of inward migration, this has demonstrated considerable potential to create fear and suspicion of “global” conspiracy. Controversy around this image eventually led to Fidesz’s membership suspension from the European People’s Party, a centre-right grouping within the European Parliament.

<Image 4 near here>

In a 2018 national election campaign speech, Orbán suggested the existence of an unseen and sinister enemy, “rootless cosmopolitans” (Gelbin and Gilman, 2017, 192), whose particular target is symbolised by the colours of the Hungarian national flag.

*“… we must fight against an opponent which is different from us. Their faces are not visible, but are hidden from view; they do not fight directly, but by stealth; they are not honourable, but unprincipled; they are not national, but international; they do not believe in work, but speculate with money; they have no homeland, feel that the whole world is theirs. They are not generous, but vengeful, and always attack the heart – especially if it is red, white and green*.*”*(Orbán, 2018a). These meticulously crafted representations of external and concealed enemies appeal to ‘our’ identity symbolised by the red, white and green. They contain typically emotive injunctions to stand firm against the unified nation’s enemies. The notion of a ‘hidden power’ or (invariably foreign) conspiracy underlying Hungary’s troubles has considerable traction in the Hungarian popular and tabloid media. Fidesz-associated television, print and online sources have carried stories based on ideas of veiled powers acting on behalf of external agents. NGOs are discredited and invariably represented as political activists paid by shadowy foreign or Soros-inspired interest groups (Szombati, 2018, 13). For example, invoking an enduring Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy myth (Ablovatski, 2010, 475), environmentalists are portrayed as international ‘climate communists’ and ‘green commandos’ (Farkas, 2019; Megadja, 2019). Seemingly, there is always another ‘Other’ to confirm the existence of anti-Hungarian powers.

We noted earlier that Laclau identifies the importance of populist leaders in rescuing the nation from treacherous others. The figure of Victor Orbán is central to Fidesz success. Orbán is effectively the face of Fidesz, and his public identity has been carefully constructed. He is positioned as the embodiment of rural Hungary’s resilient Christian agrarian populism (Hann, 2016, 608) that reflects a historical antipathy towards urban, left, liberal (and Jewish) elites. This endears Orbán to significant sections of the population, cementing the relation that has formed between him and his followers. Orbán’s Instagram account, for example, constructs a carefully curated complex of ordinariness, political gravitas, Christian iconography, self-conscious parochialism, sentimentality and a grounded vision of traditional Magyar masculinity, seemingly calculated to appeal to those sympathetic to such imagery and symbolism. His deceptive proximity appears to permit the cultivation of a personal relationship with supporters. Yet, extraordinary powers are vital and Orbán has skilfully managed public emotion by representing himself and Fidesz as safeguarding the nation at a time of looming chaos symbolised in supposedly uncontrolled migration. Orbán has become a charismatic presence in Hungarian politics. However, as Weber argued (Gerth and Wright Mills, 1948, 248), charisma is impermanent, volatile and, when no longer able to enchant, can quickly recede.

**Conclusions**

We began this chapter by asking how Fidesz has been successful and what factors have contributed to their mobilization of support. Insofar as Fidesz’s achievement of parliamentary dominance and an almost total hold over state institutions is construed as ‘success’ there seems little ambiguity. Fidesz has achieved a national hegemony in which consent is cemented both by the increasing and authoritarian centralisation of powers, and discursively through its (populist) appropriation of national history, memory and nativism in the context of migration. Of course, the *relative* stability of the Hungarian economy (post-2010) is also a vital factor. It remains to be seen what impact the Covid-19 pandemic will have here.

A familiar worldview has been (re)normalised in Hungary, harnessing diverse media forms to propel Fidesz to a position of power. Fidesz discourse coalesces across media forms and is deployed to send a unified message to Hungarian society. This manipulates long-held popular fears and resentments and uses representations of an imagined ‘traditional’ national community and symbolic others. The chapter has presented an exploration of how various media forms (in this case billboards and social media platforms) have been used to solidify Fidesz’s electoral and broad political support. We have argued that key messages are consistently presented *across* media, a kind of inter-textuality which creates clear meanings (around migration and Soros, for example) that resonate between media forms. In that sense, a hybridised media landscape in Hungary has facilitated Fidesz’s political practices.

Fidesz has skilfully constructed a dominant and emotive vision of Hungary. Almost fundamentalist, seemingly terrified by the ambiguity and contingency implied by the *Other’s* presence, a desire for purity is echoed in relentless centralisation and control of the state apparatus. This vision articulates ethno-nationalism, Christianity and a volatile underlying national resentment focusing on injurious historical events. It manifestly appeals to substantial sections of the population. Yet, it relies on an exclusionary and restrictive representation of Hungary and Hungarians, in which a multi-ethnic Hungarian history and the contemporary presence of minorities is disregarded. This is further manifested in a tension between a constrictive Fidesz notion of ‘tradition’ (often set in a discourse of ‘rurality’) and a modernity that appears on a broader European register, and represented by opposition politicians and parties. Interestingly, in municipal elections in late 2019, opposition parties took control of Hungarian cities, including Budapest, illuminating a historic rural/urban tension in Hungary that may yet have implications for Fidesz hegemony.

Our exploration suggests how the realm of the imaginary (powerfully linked to emotion and sensibility) and a continuously confected collective memory shape national identity in a discourse of Hungarian ‘illiberal democracy’ embodying the repudiation of liberal constitutionalism. Fidesz has re-cast older myths in new forms in order to speak to contemporary anxieties about nation and identity. Mythmaking and a politics of memory have become vital components in contemporary Hungarian statecraft. Memory marks out what is to be remembered but necessitates historical forgetting. It is therefore partial. Fidesz’s European parliamentary campaign, following from 2018’s national elections, emphasised formations of (an implicitly authentic) national and cultural identity in a combative *Magyarság*: ’Hungarian-ness’.

Fidesz’s move rightwards provides insights into how populist discourse functions, as well as how populist, far-right nationalist rhetoric can become normalised to reshape mainstream political discourse in a modern European nation. Indeed, in Hungary, Fidesz has been more significant in shifting Hungarian politics to the right than other more obviously ‘extreme’ political groups.

**Endnotes**

1. Hungary introduced the first anti-Jewish law in Europe in 1920 (*Numerus Clausus*) followed by further laws in 1938, 1939 and 1941. Fidesz celebrates the Horthy regime as the high point of modern Hungarian history and that regime’s interests and those of the Christian churches’ were shared, especially in terms of a deeply held anti-Semitism. The current relationship between the churches and the state is complex, but some have been supportive of and supported by Fidesz. Indeed, there is an argument that some Christian churches have been co-opted by the current regime. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There is a range of right/far-right websites and social media accounts in Hungary. Kuruc.info and Elég are well known. There are also high-profile Fidesz supporting publicists (Zsolt Bajer or Tamás Pilhál are examples) who relentlessly push a far-right position. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In a recent court case, Roma children in the village of Gyöngyöspata were awarded 99 million HUF (about 280,000 Euros) in compensation because their school had segregated them on the basis of ethnicity. Orbán’s response to this was considered by many to embody anti-Roma sentiments (Szurovecz, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This includes manipulation of electoral rules, gerrymandering, initiating forms of clientelism and ‘vote-buying’ (Scheppele, 2019, 317; Kreko and Enyedi, 2018, 40; Mares and Young, 2019, 451). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. One source indicated that Government spent about 28,000,000 Euros on “*communication and consultation*… *propaganda*” in the 2018 national election period, including billboard posters (Oroszi, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Hungarian born Soros, is a liberal Jewish financier-philanthropist who funds a range of broadly ‘progressive’ causes and organisations. His ‘Open Society Foundation’ draws on the work of the philosopher Karl Popper. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Hungary refused to accept 1294 refugees under the EU’s 2015 plans to relocate 120000 refugees, mainly from Syria. The Fidesz government initiated a referendum in 2016 on the acceptance of the EU’s compulsory migrant quota. Although the result was constitutionally invalid (a 44% turnout gave a 98% rejection), the referendum mechanism placed migration firmly on the political agenda and marked the EU as attempting to undermine Hungarian sovereignty. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Hungary is identified by the UN as one of a number of European countries set to see their population decline by more than 15% by 2050. Over the past thirty years the population has declined by one million to 9.8 million. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Currently the Hungarian Roma community is estimated at around 11% of the population. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Hungary is an ‘emigration’ country with significant numbers migrating to the west in recent years creating justifiable demographic anxiety (Gödri, Soltész, B., & Bodacz-Nagy, 2014)). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This image, showing refugees on the Slovenian border, was also used by Nigel Farage in the 2016 UK Brexit referendum campaign. Critics then noted similarities to Nazi propaganda, and Farage claimed that it ‘won’ the referendum. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Initiated by Fidesz, since 2010 an annual Trianon commemoration day articulating national grievance has been held annually. A Trianon memorial was recently erected in Budapest amidst significant controversy. One Fidesz-associated historian claimed a thousand years to be insufficient to process the trauma and tragedy of Trianon (Schmidt, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The ‘Soros Plan’ refers to a corpus of ideas presented by Soros about migration, the preservation of the EU and support of developing countries. In fact, Soros has argued for a managed system of migration into Europe accompanied by strong borders.

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