

Draft version

The advantages of chaos¹: myth-making and Covid-19 in Hungary

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new opportunities and challenges for populist regimes. A growing body of work has explored the formation of populist and nationalist political reactions in the wake of a global health crisis. This article explores mythmaking and the Covid 19 pandemic in populist Hungary. We identify pandemic ‘mythogenic’ narratives that reconfigure and replay older ethno-nationalist myths, those of the ‘polluting’ alien *other*, Hungarian exceptionalism, and treachery and betrayal. Thus, the power of global crisis is drawn into extant myths to support local political ends and the interests of Hungary’s governing party. The article cites examples of mythologising practice from Hungary’s hybrid media landscape, suggesting Hungarian politics is as much contested within the mythic and symbolic as in other domains.

Keywords: Covid-19, Hungary, Fidesz, myth, populism

Introduction

During the global COVID-19 pandemic (‘Covid’) populist regimes have faced new opportunities and challenges. In this article we focus on the pandemic in Hungary, regarded by many as a model of populist governance. We explore how the Hungarian government’s pandemic political strategy utilised the public sphere during 2020 and 2021 for the promotion of political messages, especially significant in Hungary where parliamentary elections were scheduled for April 2022. We cite examples of pandemic mythologising from Hungary’s hybrid media landscape and argue that Hungarian politics is deeply contested within mythic and symbolic domains, indeed as much there as in the domain of economics. Our argument is that the pandemic created a vital space for new forms of populist mythologising through a reinvigoration of older political narratives reconfigured for new political and pandemic realities.

¹ In Mann’s novella *Death in Venice*, the protagonist, Aschenbach, colludes with Venetian commerce in obscuring the significance of an incipient cholera epidemic: business must survive. Aschenbach wonders how “... *in the stricken and disordered city*” he might turn circumstances to his own benefit, how he might secure “... *the advantages of chaos*” (Mann, T. *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, (London, Vintage Books, 1998, 259). Undoubtedly, many politicians have similarly marvelled at Covid’s political scope.

The instinct of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his governing party Fidesz for using crises politically has often been noted and Orbán quickly recognised Covid's potential as a space in which political capital could be successfully accumulated.² Fidesz's economic liberalisation, flexible labour markets and moral economy of workfare initially shaped Hungary's pandemic response,³ and early on Orbán referred to his "*economy protection plan*" but cautioned "... *there's no such thing as money for free... the world has never seen a community receiving money as a gift, without any work or effort...*"⁴ The interests of capital were the primary focus of Hungarian government support: moratoria on loans, temporary tax exemptions and wage subsidies and reduction of business taxes for SMEs.⁵

However, management of the pandemic was not restricted to intervention in the economic domain. In the article we trace the Fidesz government's political messaging across media platforms and note how myth was harnessed and reorientated to further support Fidesz's populist nationalism at a time of global and local crisis. The pandemic opened up symbolic spaces in which Fidesz vigorously attempted to strengthen its appeal to that elusive entity 'the nation'. During the pandemic Fidesz-supporting media has been vital, facilitating representations of Orbán's professed success in combating Covid, enhancing his charisma and contributing to a popular political imagination through which Fidesz sustains its hegemony. At this time, the Orbán government assumed increasingly centralised political control of the pandemic. It strengthened the state apparatus whilst also conducting a belligerent and confrontational outward-facing politics designed to create political enemies.

² Körösenyi, A. The Theory and Practice of Plebiscitary Leadership: Weber and the Orbán regime, *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures*, 33 (2), (2018).

³ Vidra refers to this as Hungarian social policy's 'punitive turn': increasing inequality, vulnerability and the marginalisation especially of the Roma population; see Vidra, Z. "Hungary's punitive turn, the shift from welfare to workfare", *Post-Communist Studies* 51 (2018) 73-80; also Hungler, S. and Kende Á, "Diverting Welfare Paths: Ethnicization of Unemployment and Public Work in Hungary", e-cadernos CES [Online], 35 | (2021), 114-139, <https://journals.openedition.org/eces/6299> accessed March 23rd, 2022. Carefully targeted austerity discourse is well-established and, despite *overall* poverty levels apparently declining, for many Hungarians life is precarious, see, for example, Branyiczki, R. Gábor, A. Szivós „Poverty and Social Exclusion in Hungary and the EU”, in G. Tóth (Editor), *Hungarian Social Report 2019*, (Budapest: TÁRKI Social Research Institute, 2019); Albert, F. *ESPN Thematic Report on In-work poverty Hungary*, (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2019); Czírfusz, M. *Annual Report on Housing Poverty in Hungary- Executive Summary*, (Budapest: Habitat for Hungary, 2019).

⁴ Orbán, V. (c) "Good Morning Hungary", April 3rd 2020.

⁵ World Health Organization, *Covid-19 Health System Response Monitor*, February 18th 2021 <https://www.covid19healthsystem.org/countries/hungary/livinghit.aspx?Section=6.%20Measures%20in%20the%20sector&Type=ChapterSection> accessed October 4th 2021

As we will demonstrate, Orbán's adversarial and divisive politics relies on re-mythologising old and mythologising new *others*.

The following section of the article conceptualises political myth and mythologising in the Hungarian media context. We then explore Fidesz's politicisation of the pandemic's first three waves (roughly the period from early 2020 to the summer of 2021) by drawing on media reports, party speeches, political social media posts and public health campaigns, noting how Fidesz discourse is mobilised across a range of Fidesz-friendly media.⁶ The article outlines three distinct political myths deployed by Fidesz during the pandemic and we indicate how these replay older traditions and sources of popular anxiety to consolidate and reinvigorate support for the ruling party. The article concludes by briefly discussing the implications of Fidesz pandemic political practices for post-pandemic politics in Hungary.

Populist political myth-making and Hungarian media

We do not undertake a detailed discussion of the concept of populism here. That has been adequately completed elsewhere in an extensive literature.⁷ Populism invariably relies on an antagonism between discourses of 'the people', who populist politicians claim to represent and on whose behalf act, and 'elites', an elastic '*other*' identity, currently defined by populists on the political right (like Fidesz) in terms of various forms of left-liberal progressivism. The antagonism is embodied in an underlying opposition between purity (embodied in the people) and corruption (represented by the elite).⁸ This purity/corruption binary is especially salient in Hungary whose government represents its own identity in precisely these terms. Hungary exemplifies a populism emerging through insecurities and inequalities caused by post-communist and neo-liberal economic restructuring, and population changes due to declining fertility, stagnant life expectancy and high rates of mortality. Westward emigration of significant sections of the young and qualified population intensifies fears centred on the real or imagined demographic consequences of post-2015

⁶ This includes the weekly half-hour radio interview with the Hungarian Prime Minister, '*Good Morning Hungary*', broadcast on the state's Kossuth Rádió. These interviews create a channel between Orbán as charismatic leader and 'the Hungarian people'. Interviews are televised and widely publicised in news bulletins across Hungarian media. We draw on the transcripts available in English and German translation (checked for accuracy) on the Prime Minister's official website.

⁷ Canovan, M. *Populism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1981); Mudde, C. "The Populist Zeitgeist" in *Government and Opposition*, 39 (4), (2004), 541-563,

⁸ Mudde, 543.

external migration into Europe through Hungary.⁹ It is possible to understand support for nationalistic populism in Hungary as a response to the ontological insecurities and existential anxieties that underpin a prospective “... ‘*death of the nation*’”¹⁰, a theme regularly deployed by Orbán.

Populist politics represents itself as the ultimate expression of a Rousseauian notion of the general will and populism defines *forms* of strategic political practice deployed in acquiring and keeping power. Populism’s will to power is represented by populist politicians’ as purifying corrupted social and political space and purging corrupt elites. The appeal to ‘the people’ and the flourishing of mythologised enemies provides a cohesive political narrative underlying populist politics.¹¹ A symbiotic relationship apparently exists between populism and pandemic and Gugushvili, et al. note “*disease outbreaks can fuel populism, and populism can fuel disease spread*”¹². Populist-nationalist and discriminatory politics exacerbate health inequalities within and between nations¹³. Anti-elite polemic erodes opportunities to forge proactive responses to pandemic through the rejection of ‘elite’ medical expertise. Global pandemics, such as Covid, may strengthen populist-nationalism particularly in restrictions on civil liberties, freedom of movement, pathologizing the ‘polluting other’ through medical and vaccine nationalism encouraging protectionism and border closures.¹⁴

In Hungary embedded national political myths have been carefully rehearsed in response to Covid. They appeal to an imagined national interest and recurrently draw on

⁹ Population decline (continuous since 1981 and, compounded by Covid, highest in 2021) has been a target of Fidesz pronatalist policy, see Bradford S. and Cullen, “Populist Myths and Ethno-Nationalist Fears in Hungary”, in *Rise of the Far Right. Technologies of Recruitment and Mobilization*, eds Melody Devries, Judith Bessant and Rob Watts (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021) 48-51. Though demographic anxieties appear politically inspired, there is evidence of fears about emigration and demography in Hungary amongst Fidesz voters, see Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung-Policy Solutions, „*Szorongások és Félelmek Magyarországon*” (Anxieties and Fears in Hungary), (Budapest: Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung-Policy Solutions, 2021).

¹⁰ Bibó, I. (1946), ‘Miseries of East European Small States’, in I.Z. Dénes, *The Art of Peacemaking. Political Essays by István Bibó*, (Newhaven: Yale University Press 2015), 130-150.

¹¹ Laclau, E. *On populist reason*. (London: Verso, 2005).

¹² Gugushvili, A., Koltai, J., Stuckler, D., & McKee, M.. “Votes, populism, and pandemics”. *International Journal of Public Health*, 65(6), (2020)721-722;

¹³ Singh, P. "How Exclusionary Nationalism Has Made the World Socially Sicker from COVID-19." *Nationalities Papers*, 50(1), (2022): 104-117; Urbanovics, A, & B Teleki. "The economic context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Mediterranean countries: A comparative analysis." *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 7, no. 3 (2021): 157-1

¹⁴ Bieber, F. “Global Nationalism in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic”. *Nationalities Papers*, (2020)1-13.

representations of a pure ethno-nationalist Hungary and identify threatening and polluting enemies. Mythologising has become part of the fine grain of Fidesz political practice, contributing to the construction of a parallel political world in which facts and truth appear confused or dissolved in an alternate reality, characterised by the creation of nation-threatening enemies and endorsing Fidesz-authored political solutions. We do not suggest any necessary distinction between truth and falsity in myth as in other forms of discourse in which humans become entangled. Myth may be literally ‘fictive’ but also ‘true’, as a novel may be fictional but also contain truth about its subject. As Foucault points out, it is the “... *effects of truth*” produced in discourse, itself neither necessarily true nor false, that is important for analysis.¹⁵

Political myths are ideologically and emotionally significant narratives, collective acts of imagination whose meaning is in part intended by their teller or distributor. They are mobilised strategically to provide an “*illusionary sense of protection*”¹⁶, controlling meaning and framing stories, ‘ownership’ and principles. Political mythmaking attempts symbolically to sustain societies’ collective representations and memory and can entail a radical reshaping of the present, moving beyond legacy into recreating the contemporary state.¹⁷ Political myths are distributed discursively: written text, images, music, film, architecture, cartography.¹⁸ However, it is not simply the *structure* of myth that is important but its *content*. All societies are ridden with contradictions and myth’s content offers a “...*mode of signification*”¹⁹ in which meaning may be captured through the (temporary) resolution of ambiguity or contradiction. In Hungary, this entails wrestling with aspects of cultural meaning, ethnic identity and historical legacy to accommodate nationalist discourses in which historic myths of nation are mobilised to consolidate power. Such historical legacies have

¹⁵ Gordon, C. (ed), *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977, Michel Foucault*, (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1980), 118. Thus, we are unconvinced by arguments suggesting a contemporary ‘post-truth’ era, see for example, Polyák, G. & Nagy, K. “Regulating health communication in the post-truth era” *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 7 (3) 120-138.

¹⁶ Mincu, M. E. “Myth, rhetoric, and ideology in Eastern European education: Schools and citizenship in Hungary, Poland, and Romania”. *European Education*, 41(1), (2009). 55-78.

¹⁷ Pytlas, B. “Radical-right narratives in Slovakia and Hungary: historical legacies, mythic overlaying and contemporary politics”. *Patterns of prejudice*, 47(2), (2013)162-183; 4.

¹⁸ An example is the ‘Horthy-fiction’ of parts of Budapest in which built and re-built environments are invested with restored (yet contested) symbolic value deriving from a confected conservative nostalgia and melancholy for the 1930s/40s Horthy regime in Hungary. Hungary’s historic peripheral status in Europe is not merely a consequence of discourse. Ontologies of space and place, of occupation, capital accumulation and exploitation are important.

¹⁹ Barthes, R. *Mythologies*, (London: Granada, 1973), 109.

been framed around an exclusionary narrative of the Hungarian nation and people.²⁰ Of course, Hungarian society is shaped by other contradictions frequently located in tensions between imagined tradition (including some norms associated with Hungary's earlier communist regime) and modernity. Current gender and sexuality discourse in Hungary is a potent example.²¹

Myth readily attaches to some 'mythogenic' events or states,²² pandemic being one example. National trauma and suffering are foundational to the political myths that have sustained Fidesz power since 2010 and clearly present in the context of global pandemic, readily harnessed discursively to nationalist ends. Media has central significance in producing, consolidating and distributing political myths. Superficially, the Hungarian media environment appears diverse. However, in the last decade, this key site of symbolic production has been subjugated in the "*refeudalisation of the public sphere*."²³ The Fidesz "*media juggernaut*"²⁴ overshadows state, national, regional and online media consolidating Fidesz's position through state support (advertising revenue and generous funding to pro-Fidesz thinktanks and 'research' organisations with high profile media presence) to an expansive pro-government media network. Fidesz-supporting media operates under the imprimatur of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), incorporating some 400 media outlets subject neither to competition policy nor independent scrutiny. Fidesz discourse is mobilised in diverse media forms articulating old and new: regional newspapers, television and radio, online news, billboards and social media platforms creating a comprehensive network for distributing and managing key political messages. Increasing attention is being given to developing Fidesz-supportive social media 'influence'. *Megafon Központ*, for example, reportedly trained a network of social media 'influencers' (mainly established right-wing commentators), asking "*Have you also already noticed how social media is flooded with left-liberal content? The fight for Hungary's future will be decided*

²⁰ Toomey, M. "History, Nationalism and Democracy: Myth and Narrative in Viktor Orbán's 'Illiberal Hungary'". *New Perspectives*, 26(1), (2018) 87-108.

²¹ Pető, A. "Three readings of one law. Reregulating sexuality in Hungary", *LSE EUROPP*, July 6th 2021 at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3898871 accessed 30th August 2021

²² Jenks, C. *Transgression*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 113.

²³ Scheiring, G and Szombati, K. "The Structural Trap of Labour Politics in Hungary" *Rupture Magazine*, August, 2019, 8; .

²⁴ Krekó, P., & Enyedi, Z. "Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism". *Journal of Democracy*, 29(3), (2018) 39-51, 46.

here! That's why we have to join forces." Substantial sums of money were apparently invested in these activities, anticipating the 2022 election, although their source is unclear.²⁵

Chadwick argues that old and new media practices and institutions coexist and are interdependent, forming hybrid political media environments.²⁶ Political elites adapt to this, attempting to advance their agendas both on and offline. Resultant mixed media-logics include a renewal of old media systems such as broadcast and print, alongside attempts to utilise and develop influential mega-platforms such as Facebook or Instagram as well as local small scale online portals. Political parties and activists are increasingly accomplished in the use of online technologies, memes and video-clips for example. Audiences inevitably engage differently with and through these formats and messages. However, a unity of political message and powerful evocation of nation, identity and *the Other* runs across Fidesz media, institutionally enabled by KESMA and shaping a distinctive "*regime of representation*".²⁷ In this intertextual repertoire – accumulated media representations and cross references – the political task is to manage or challenge meaning. However, meaning is never unambiguous, always potentially contested or subject to drift and continuous cultural and mythologising work is necessary in the attempt to gain fixity of message and political position.

Information dissemination during the Hungarian pandemic included online daily press conferences by the 'Operational Group' (*Operatív Törzs*²⁸), established in January 2020. This included representatives of the interior ministry, ministry of human resources, health, police, military, national security and procurement. The Group was set up to coordinate Hungary's pandemic response and it held a daily televised 'press conference' (*sajtótájékoztató*) until May 2021. These stage-managed events comprised one-way dissemination of government information. Policy or strategy questions from citizens or journalists were pre-selected and opportunities for scrutiny or critical questioning were absent. Public information was also disseminated through a dedicated government web-based '*Information Page on Coronavirus*', a Facebook '*Coronavirus information page*', wide ranging press and television news, and the Prime Minister's weekly radio broadcast on

²⁵ See <https://megafon.hu>; Kaskovics M.B.; „Tízmilliókból építi fel és támogatja a kormánypárti megmondóembereket a Megafon Központ”, (“The Megafon Centre is building and supporting pro-government influencers from tens of millions”), HVG, July 26th, 2021, accessed November 11th 2021.

²⁶ Chadwick, A. *The hybrid media system: Politics and power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁷ Hall, S. “The spectacle of the ‘other’”. In *Representation*, eds S. Hall, J. Evans & S. Nixon, 2nd edition 215-287 (London, England: Sage Publications in association with the Open University, 2013).

²⁸ The Hungarian '*Törzs*' is a military term meaning 'corps'.

Kossuth Radio. In sum, *official* information was available from limited and partial sources although the wider press, including that supporting the political opposition, continuously reported on the pandemic.

In the following section we provide an overview of how the pandemic was represented in the first 18 months – from March 2020 –August 2021. We trace key events and mythologising tropes deployed at various stages of the crisis. Table 1, a modified timeline, shows the Hungarian pandemic’s three ‘waves’, reflecting infection and mortality rates and shaping a pandemic narrative. Wave one peaked in Hungary in May 2020, wave two in December 2020 and wave three in February 2021. The timeline also identifies the ‘Others’ constructed through dominant media-driven myths slotting neatly into a populist discursive repertoire. At various points these included foreigners and migrants, Hungarian financier George Soros, Brussels, the EU, the domestic ‘Left’ political opposition and its imputed leader, Ferenc Gyurcsány²⁹ and, increasingly, sexual minorities. These categories have long attracted Fidesz political disdain, yet the rapid passing of Act LXXIX in June 2021 targeting LGBTQ+ rights introduced a new front and enemies, drawing attention away from Hungary’s high Covid mortality rates.

Table 1: Pandemic waves and myths in Hungary³⁰

	<u>Wave 1</u> March-July 2020	<u>Wave 2</u> September 2020-January 2021	<u>Wave 3</u> February-June 2021
Key events	Iranian students as first infections, March 2020; virus scepticism; March 2020, ‘Act on Protecting Against the Coronavirus’ (‘Enabling Act’) passed March 30 th amidst opposition criticism; Act revoked in mid-June and replaced by ‘medical emergency’; criminalisation of publishing “false information” about the pandemic General public acceptance of government restrictions (curfew, border closures, etc.);	Rapid increases in infections and mortality; ‘State of Danger’ introduced in Parliament in addition to earlier emergency states; Opposition criticisms of government ‘under-reaction’, insufficient public information, low rates of testing, no tracing	Very high infection and mortality rates; Opposition criticisms of government ‘under-reaction’, insufficient public information, low rates of testing, no tracing; criticism of procurement of Chinese and Russian vaccines to be used without European Medicines Agency approval; polling suggested that public trust in ‘Eastern vaccines’ was low

²⁹ Ferenc Gyurcsány was Hungary’s socialist prime minister, 2004-2009, leading a left-liberal coalition under which a range of neo-liberal inspired privatisations were implemented in the largely unsuccessful attempt to strengthen economic competition and efficiency in Hungary, see Scheiring, G. & Szombati, K. “From neoliberal disembedding to authoritarian re-embedding: The making of illiberal hegemony in Hungary” *International Sociology*, 35 (6), 2020, 721-738 . Gyurcsány is currently party leader of the Democratic Coalition (DK: *Demokratikus Koalíció*) and with Soros and others, has become one of Orbán and Fidesz’s demonised political antagonists.

³⁰ Data source: Our World in Data

	some opposition criticisms of government ‘overreaction’, e.g. commandeering hospital beds in large numbers, procuring excessive numbers of inappropriate Chinese ventilators		
Infection, mortality and vaccination rates	<p>April 16th 2020 confirmed Covid cases per million people in Hungary 9.96 (EU 67.39)</p> <p>April 21st 2020 weekly confirmed Covid deaths per million people 9.45 (EU 41.27) and 3% excess mortality;</p>	<p>December 3rd 2020 confirmed Covid cases per million people in Hungary 590.12 (EU 277.27)</p> <p>December 24th weekly confirmed Covid deaths per million people 123.62 (EU 50.97) and excess mortality 42%</p> <p>January 18th 2021 1.3% of population partially vaccinated (EU 0.02%)</p>	<p>March 26th 2021 confirmed Covid cases per million people in Hungary 960.47 (EU 298.99)</p> <p>April 13th 2021 weekly confirmed Covid deaths per million people 195.35 (EU 41.52) and excess mortality (April 4th) 75% (April 22nd, Hungary’s mortality rate per million population was the world’s highest at approximately 30000 deaths)</p> <p>March 26th 2021 6.9% of population fully vaccinated and 12% partially vaccinated (EU 4.5% all doses prescribed by vaccination protocol)</p> <p>By November 7th 2021, 60% of population fully vaccinated (2 vaccinations) and 2% partially vaccinated. (EU 65.61% all doses prescribed by vaccination protocol)</p>
Key/myth discourse	Alien pollutants (foreign students/ migrants as contagion source): myths of contagion and purification	‘For Us, Hungary Comes First’: myths of Hungarian exceptionalism	Treachery, betrayal and Orbán: myths of deliverance and restoration

Three key mythologised themes from Hungarian pandemic political discourse are discussed in turn.

- Alien pollutants: myths of contagion and purification
- ‘For Us, Hungary Comes First’: myths of Hungarian exceptionalism
- Treachery, betrayal and Orbán: myths of deliverance and restoration

Alien pollutants: myths of contagion and purity

Covid emerged slowly into Hungarian public consciousness. Initial responses were confused or sceptical. Fidesz supporters referred to media plots, propaganda and “*virus hysteria*”.³¹ One Ministerial Commissioner (with responsibility for space research) reportedly

³¹ Bencsik, A. “Ami nincs azt ne keresd” („Don’t look for what’s not there”), (2020) Demokrata <https://demokrata.hu/velemeney/ami-nincs-azt-ne-keresd-212183/> accessed September 7th 2021; Váradi, J. „Masszív hisztéria van a járvány körül” („Massive hysteria around the pandemic”), *Index*, March 16th 2020 https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/16/massziv_hisztéria_van_a_jarvany_korul/ accessed September 7th 2021.

claimed Covid to be a “*message of grace from God*” intended to encourage the ‘*resurrection of faith*’.³² However, the first Covid infections identified in March 2020, including several Iranian students studying in Hungary, were soon drawn into normal Fidesz anti-migrant discourse. The students were quarantined amidst a media storm of lurid stories about their aggressive rejection of quarantine conditions. They were eventually expelled from Hungary, their appeal taken up by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee. This enabled Fidesz-loyal media to form a link between Covid, the Iranian students and George Soros,³³ a supporter of Helsinki.³⁴ Soros’s alleged ‘globalist’ betrayal of his country of birth is readily absorbed into accounts of inevitable pandemic spread through ‘open borders’ despite the Fidesz government’s initial reluctance by to close Hungary’s borders. In March 2020, as Universities were quarantined apparently because of the presence of non-Hungarian students Orbán confirmed the link between the virus and ‘migrants’.

*“... as Hungary has ... defended itself against migration, we are also protected from infections being brought into the country by migrants.”*³⁵

Orbán assured radio listeners in January 2020 that Hungary had the necessary resources to respond to the apparently distant threat of Covid, and priority was controlling the borders and

*“... the policing of immigration, as this is something coming from outside the borders. If the virus... were to arrive in the country, the border control system would have to identify it immediately.”*³⁶

Orbán warned that “... *the people of the Soros Network...*” were planning mass migration into Europe. Interlacing George Soros, Covid, migration and an amorphous alien *otherness* was conspicuous in early Hungarian media coverage of the pandemic, marking boundaries and their real, imagined or potential transgression. By March 2020, links were routinely made

³² Gábor, G. (2020), “Ferencz Orsolya. Miniszteri biztos. Magyarországon. 2020 áprilisába”, („Ferencz Orsolya. Ministerial commissioner. In Hungary. In April 2020”), *Városi Kurír* <https://varosikurir.hu/gabor-gyorgy-ferencz-orsolya/> accessed September 7th 2021.

³³ George Soros, Hungarian born liberal, Jewish financier-philanthropist has long been demonised by Fidesz as an enemy of Hungary because of his imputed support of a borderless world in which migration becomes a norm, for Fidesz, the so-called ‘Soros Plan’. The ‘Soros network’ is a shorthand used by Fidesz supporters to describe virtually any western individual or organisation that challenges Fidesz. Soros remains vital to Fidesz politics as a primary enemy of the state.

³⁴ Magyar Nemzet (a) “A rendbontó irániak oldalára álltak Sorosék” („Soros’s people stood on the side of the disorderly Iranians”) Magyar Nemzet, March 19th 2020

³⁵ Orbán, V. (b) “*Good Morning Hungary*”, March 13th 2020.

³⁶ Orbán, V. (a)³⁶ “*Good Morning Hungary*”, January 31st 2020.

between migration and the pandemic “... *Hungary has successfully defended itself against migration, we are also protected from infections...*”³⁷ Initial representations of Covid as a *foreign threat* to Hungarians’ health and safety resonate with earlier political media discourses that framed the ethnic and cultural *Other* (specifically the migrant) as a threat to the nation’s purity.

We have argued elsewhere³⁸ that the preservation of an imaginary ethno-nation is a vital component in Fidesz discourse, most recently mobilised through the 2015 migrant crisis and in national and European elections in 2018 and 2019. Nationalism’s popular re-acceptance has necessitated ideological work in symbolic-cultural domains, these often drawing on historic resentments and motifs.³⁹ Covid’s characterisation as a ‘foreign’ disease extends this broader narrative of the polluting *Other* violating Hungarian biological, social-cultural and geographical space. Unsurprisingly, Orbán initially characterised this violation through a metaphor of war. Szabó notes that this metaphor dominated Fidesz pandemic discourse during early 2020, Orbán arguing the country was fighting a war on two fronts: migration (ongoing since 2015) and the Covid virus.⁴⁰ Although the war metaphor alerts us to important aspects of Fidesz political discourse there is more at stake than this single metaphor can carry. Enduring political myths of Hungarian greatness, heroism or betrayal of the nation and the people appeal to solidarity and national purification, extending beyond the Covid crisis.

Parliament agreed to institutional changes, further centralising Fidesz power, in March and May 2020, in the form of two ‘Enabling Acts’. The first of these was justified by the ‘*medical crisis situation*’ (*egészségügyi válsághelyzet*). It permitted executive rule by decree; that is, to act independently of Parliament,⁴¹ and was compared by some analysts with

³⁷ Orbán, V. (b) “*Good Morning Hungary*”, March 13th 2020.

³⁸ Bradford S. and Cullen.

³⁹ Following the First World War, 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 and exemplifies a perception of Western betrayal leading to Hungary’s downfall.

⁴⁰ Szabó, L.P. (2020) *Háború járvány idején – Hogyan beszél Orbán Viktor a koronavírusról?*” (War during an Epidemic – How Viktor Orbán Talks about the Coronavirus”) in A. Körösenyi, A. Szabó and B. Böcskei, *Vírusba Oltott Politika. Világjárvány és politikatudomány (Virus Injected by Politics. Pandemic and Political Science)*, (Budapest TK Politikatudomány Intézet, Napvilág Kiado, 2020).

⁴¹ Kovács, Kriszta: *Hungary’s Orbánistan: A Complete Arsenal of Emergency Powers*, *VerfBlog*, April 6th 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/hungarys-orbanistan-a-complete-arsenal-of-emergency-powers/>. Somewhat bizarrely it seemed then, very early legislation under the Act included changing adoption rules to preclude ‘gay adoption’ Draft Version- please do not cite without permission – final version can be found Bradford, S & Cullen, F (2022) *The Advantages of Chaos: Myth-Making and Covid-19 in Hungary*, *POPULISM* 5 (2022) 1–27

Hitler's 1933 response to the Reichstag fire. The Act permanently amended the Hungarian Criminal Code to provide for up to 5 years imprisonment for *fearmongering... during a state of danger*". By July 2020, 134 criminal investigations had been initiated, many of individuals expressing opinions about the pandemic.⁴² The Act was replaced by a second, giving government further "... *immense unchecked powers*."⁴³ These included a strengthening military presence in patrolling curfews and involvement in the management of strategic industries and hospitals, heightening a sense of crisis.

For Orbán, the Enabling Act created the capacity to act with "*extraordinary speed*" in the interests of the Hungarian people. Offering no response to condemnation from the political opposition, the EU, NGOs and lawyers, Orbán skilfully used opposition criticism of the Act to indicate that Hungary was not only under external attack by migrants and Covid, but internally from "...*a virus... of an intellectual nature*" (Orbán (e)).⁴⁴ In a radio interview in April 2020, amidst criticisms of Hungary's non-adherence to 'rule of law' and access to EU pandemic funds, Orbán's interviewer referred to Hungary as "... *the target of outrage whipped up in the Western media...*".⁴⁵ Orbán discounted criticism from individual governments as part of political knockabout but returning to Soros, said "... *we always see the hand of George Soros in developments, and this is also the case now*"(Orbán, *ibid*). Orbán referred to Soros suggesting perpetual bonds as a means of funding the EU's pandemic recovery fund. For Orbán, this was "*Soros Plan 2.0*" (the first being open borders and migration into Europe) signalling treacherous collusion between the EU and Soros in attempting to undermine Hungarian pandemic provisions, as well as achieving the "*liquidation*" of nation state sovereignty. EU Parliament members, Orbán argued, are at "... *one end of an umbilical cord through which George Soros pumps vital fluids...*" (creating a

and preventing citizens formally altering their birth sex in official records, an attack on LGBTQ rights, designating this group as yet another polluting enemy.

⁴² Council of Europe "Memorandum on freedom of expression and media freedom in Hungary" <https://rm.coe.int/memorandum-on-freedom-of-expression-and-media-freedom-in-hungary/1680a1e67e> (2020) accessed September 7th 2021.

⁴³ Halmai, Gábor, Mészáros, Gábor; Scheppele, Kim Lane: *From Emergency to Disaster: How Hungary's Second Pandemic Emergency will Further Destroy the Rule of Law*, *VerfBlog*, 30th May 2020 <https://verfassungsblog.de/from-emergency-to-disaster/>

⁴⁴ Orbán, V. (e) "*Good Morning Hungary*", May 1st 2020.

⁴⁵ Orbán, V. (d) "*Good Morning Hungary*" April 24th 2020.

system of)...*global governance*.”⁴⁶ A pure and singular Hungary is, thus, represented as ceaselessly threatened (by the political opposition, Brussels and Soros), and in danger of contagion by Covid and other enemies.

‘For Us, Hungary Comes First’:⁴⁷ myths of Hungarian exceptionalism

Fidesz’s widely disseminated Hungarian ‘illiberal democracy’ and ethno-nationalism delineates a thoroughly mythologised national identity around which it has solidified its support. Orbán reconstructed a national exceptionalism in which Hungary exists in a relation of permanent antagonism with selected others, routinely cast as enemies. An inflamed sense of national pride prevails in Fidesz politics and Orbán has weaponised a belligerent attack-nationalism that applauds an imagined Hungarian greatness. The spirit of the Hungarian people, somehow beyond the norm, incomparable and, implicitly, superior to *unexceptional others* is regularly invoked. Citing Hungary’s linguistic and cultural isolation from surrounding nations and mythologising a predestined duty, Orbán earlier proclaimed:

“... *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?*”⁴⁸

Fidesz media and pundits claimed *exceptional* Hungarian achievements in managing the pandemic first wave. Fidesz-supporting *Mandiner*, for example, claimed that only Germany and Austria were ahead of Hungary in the number of available hospital beds.⁴⁹ Zsolt Bayer, a founding member of Fidesz, stated that the number of Hungary’s ventilators and hospital beds available for active care was the highest in Europe, sardonically contrasting this with opposition representations of a “...*ruined and bled-dry Hungarian health service*.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Orbán, V. (e) “*Good Morning Hungary*”, May 1st 2020.

⁴⁷ This was a slogan used by Orbán in his ‘state of the nation’ speech in 2018.

⁴⁸ Orbán, V. “Viktor Orbán’s Speech on the Anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, March 15th 2015”. *Website of the Hungarian Government*, , available at <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/viktor-orban-s-speech-on-the-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-of-1848>, accessed 28 January 2020.

⁴⁹ Mandiner, „Korhási ágyak: a harmadik legjobb vagyunk Európában” (“Hospital beds: we are the third best in Europe”), March 28th 2020 https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20200328_korhazi_agyak_a_harmadik_legjobb_vagyunk_europaban accessed September 7th 2021.

⁵⁰ Bayer, Z. ‘Tönkretéve’ (‘Destroyed’), *Bádog – Bayer Zsolt blogja*, (2020) <https://badog.blogstar.hu/2020/03/19/tonkreteve/92022/> accessed September 7th 2021.

In Hungary, as elsewhere, the global has overshadowed national and local political space and the pandemic has challenged the centrality of the nation-state. Yet, Fidesz has demonstrated the potential of nation-state nationalism in its pandemic response. Independent participation in east-facing supply chains enabled the swift acquisition of Russian and Chinese vaccines, supporting Orbán's insistent claims of Hungary's exceptional pandemic strategy. In September 2020 Orbán claimed "... *Hungary has defended itself more successfully than anywhere else in Europe... The Government measures success in the number of lives saved* ." ⁵¹ However, by October 2020, Hungarian infection and mortality rates were rapidly accelerating. Further mitigating responses were initiated including border closures, compulsory mask wearing, restrictions on public assembly and curfews.

EU second-wave vaccine procurement problems (roughly the end of 2020 and early 2021) were carefully exploited by Fidesz, enabling Hungary to strengthen existing eastward alliances as Hungary departed from pan-European procurement arrangements to acquire stocks of Russia's Sputnik V and China's Sinopharm vaccines. Neither had (nor have yet) been approved by the EMA but were internally approved for use in Hungary in April 2020. Orbán was apparently vaccinated with the Chinese Sinopharm "... *the one I trust the most... the Chinese have known this virus the longest... they probably also know the most about it* ." ⁵² The Hungarian procurement process (and subsequent levels of vaccination) seemed to be the key, demonstrating Hungary's capacity to acquire vaccines *more quickly* than the EU. Thus, procurement became highly politicised and was used to boost representations of Hungary's exceptional pandemic performance, relentlessly reiterated by Orbán in *Good Morning Hungary*. ⁵³ Most ironically, Orbán claimed that because of Katalin Karikó, a Hungarian biochemist (who left Hungary in 1985) who had made a major contribution to the development of the Pfizer vaccine, then the vaccine was "... *in fact a Hungarian vaccine*;

⁵¹ Magyar Nemzet (b) "A sikert a megmentett életek számában méri a kormány" ("The Government measures success in the number of lives saved"), September 12th 2020

⁵² Orbán, V. (i) "*Good Morning Hungary*" January 29th 2021.

⁵³ It later became clear that the Sinopharm was not recommended for the over-60s yet was widely administered in Hungary. Hungarian media reported that a significant proportion of Sinopharm vaccinated over-60s did not develop sufficient anti-bodies (Ferencsik and Sarkadi, 2021). Tensions subsequently arose between Government's Chief Medical Officer and 'independent' medical expertise over the need for a third booster vaccine for the over-60s.

American money and Hungarian brains are in it”⁵⁴ claiming Hungary’s exceptional scientific standing.

The Fidesz administration was extremely sensitive to criticism of its pandemic strategy and especially of the condition of the Hungarian health service. Criticism jeopardised representations of ‘exceptional Hungary’. As Covid mortality in the third wave reached about 300 a day in March 2021, tensions between the government, the independent media and the Hungarian medical associations (*Magyar Orvosi Kamara* and *Magyar Orvosok Szakszervezete*) were palpable. Independent Hungarian media sources sent a joint ‘dear decision-makers’ open letter⁵⁵ to the government, supported by MOK and MOSZ, requesting journalist access to hospitals and doctors to enhance public understanding of the pandemic and to encourage preventive measures. However, the myth of exceptional Hungary (having “...defended itself more successfully than anywhere else in Europe”) under attack from ‘the Left’ shaped the government’s response. Hospitals, pronounced Zoltan Kovács from the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, are for ‘*healing and not for creating press footage*’. He emphasised the public was being given daily pandemic information but despite this the ...” *Left-wing portals ... are spreading fake news to discredit the Hungarian health care system.*”⁵⁶ Orbán confirmed that “*This is not the time to go to hospitals to make fake videos or produce fake news.*”⁵⁷ Independent journalists suggested that government sought to conceal what was happening in hospitals because of the precarious state of Hungarian healthcare.⁵⁸

Subsequently, Fidesz-media and Fidesz politicians worked frantically to sensitise the electorate to the dangers posed by an imaginary political left, ensuring that a convincing ‘left’ identity can be constructed in contrast to Fidesz’s own ‘national conservatism’. The latter

⁵⁴ MTVA, (2021), <https://mediaklikk.hu/miniszterelnoki-interjuk/cikk/2021/01/03/orban-viktor-miniszterelnoki-interju-vasarnapi-ujzag-januar-3/>

⁵⁵ https://nepszava.hu/3114872_kozosen-kerik-a-hiteles-tajekoztatast-ujzagirok-nyilt-levele-a-miniszterelnoknek

⁵⁶ Kasza, J. ‘A Magyar Orvosi Kamara és a Magyar Orvosok Szakszervezete is beengedné a médiát a kórházokba’ (‘The Hungarian Medical Chamber and the Hungarian Medical Union would also allow the media into hospitals’) *Medial*, April 2nd 2021 <https://media1.hu/2021/04/02/a-magyar-orvosi-kamara-es-a-magyar-orvosok-szakszervezete-szerint-is-be-kellene-engedni-a-mediát-a-korhazakba/> accessed September 7th 2021

⁵⁷ In Kasza, 2021.

⁵⁸ Szabó, A. and Wirth, Z. ‘PM Orbán tried to prevent hospital dramas with vaccination. In the end, he could only hide them’, *Direkt 36*, August 23rd 2021 <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/oltással-akarta-elkerulni-orban-a-korhazai-dramakat-vegul-csak-elitkolni-tudta-azokat/> accessed September 7th 2021

acts in the interests of Hungary while the former is represented as being in the grip of malevolent foreign powers and, of course, George Soros. Fidesz's colonisation of large sections of the media through KESMA facilitated this.

Treachery, betrayal and Orbán: myths of deliverance and restoration

By early 2021 the pandemic positioned an apparently autonomous Hungary as a dealmaker on the world stage. Hungary's eastward turn created further distance from the EU and Orbán was represented as a heroic national saviour by Fidesz media. This was a significant power-play undertaken at a time of international crisis, generating political capital from a stream of Chinese and Russian vaccines and medical equipment as well as EU sourced vaccines. Fidesz-media was able to challenge the opposition (and an imagined 'Left') as traitorous through their reluctance to support the use of non-EU licensed vaccines and jeopardising Hungarian lives. This period signalled the instigation of the 2022 election campaign. Indeed, since Autumn 2020, Orbán had been mythologising pandemic politics, claiming in one Good Morning Hungary radio interview that 'the Left' was acting in "... *opposition*" to the country, that "*Soros's people*" were infiltrating the European Parliament on behalf of global capital, that 34 million migrants were to be given financial benefits and housing by the EU, and that Hungary would vaccinate the entire population "... *in a single weekend*" ...⁵⁹

One event was especially significant. In late December 2020 as Covid mortality rates in Hungary were rising steeply, but before vaccines were available, *Politico* published an interview in English with the Director of Political Capital Institute⁶⁰, Péter Krekó. Krekó warned that Hungary's possible use of non-EU approved (Chinese and Russian) vaccines could damage vaccine confidence. "*If you undermine the willingness of people to vaccinate themselves, [Orbán] can suffer the political consequences.*"⁶¹ Fidesz media's mistranslation of the interview, gave the impression that Krekó blamed Orbán personally for vaccine resistance. The Fidesz-media erupted, accusing Krekó of treason by encouraging the

⁵⁹ Orbán, V. (g) "Good Morning Hungary" October 9th 2020; Orbán, V. (h) "Good Morning Hungary" December 18th 2020.

⁶⁰ An independent policy research, analysis and consulting institute established in 2001 in Budapest.

⁶¹ Deutsch, J. "In Hungary, politicization of vaccine hangs over immunization efforts", *Politico*, December 26th 2020 <https://www.politico.eu/article/in-hungary-politicizing-of-vaccine-hangs-over-immunization-efforts/> accessed September 7th 2021.

political opposition to undermine vaccine confidence. Krekó subsequently received death threats.

Krekó's interview was linked to an alleged 'leftist campaign' referred to by the national newspaper Magyar Nemzet as "... *the left-wing death campaign*". Magyar Nemzet incited responses to the mis-translated Krekó interview, demanding the political opposition "... *distance itself from this man, from this strategy and clearly state that it does not want to climb back into power on the backs of the dead.*"⁶² Zsolt Bayer initiated a petition on the conservative portal *Citizengo.org* attacking Krekó and the 'death campaign' achieving 24000 signatures. This was quickly absorbed into mainstream Fidesz discourse especially visible on social media platforms. Fidesz politician Máté Kocsis claimed "...*the left has again stooped to the level of the death campaign*"⁶³ linking Krekó's interview with an alleged leftist anti-vaccination campaign comprising fake videos and counterfeit statistics. The story ran across the Fidesz media environment, print, broadcast, and social media, encouraging a singular message: the political opposition is dangerously anti-vaxx.

⁶²Magyar Nemzet (c) "Aláírásgyűjtés a baloldal halálkampánya ellen" ("Signature collection against the left-wing death campaign") January 5th 2021

⁶³ Kocsis, M. "A baloldal megint szintet lépett a halálkampányban" ("The left has again sunk to the level of the death campaign") *Facebook*, January 5th 2021.

Image 1⁶⁴

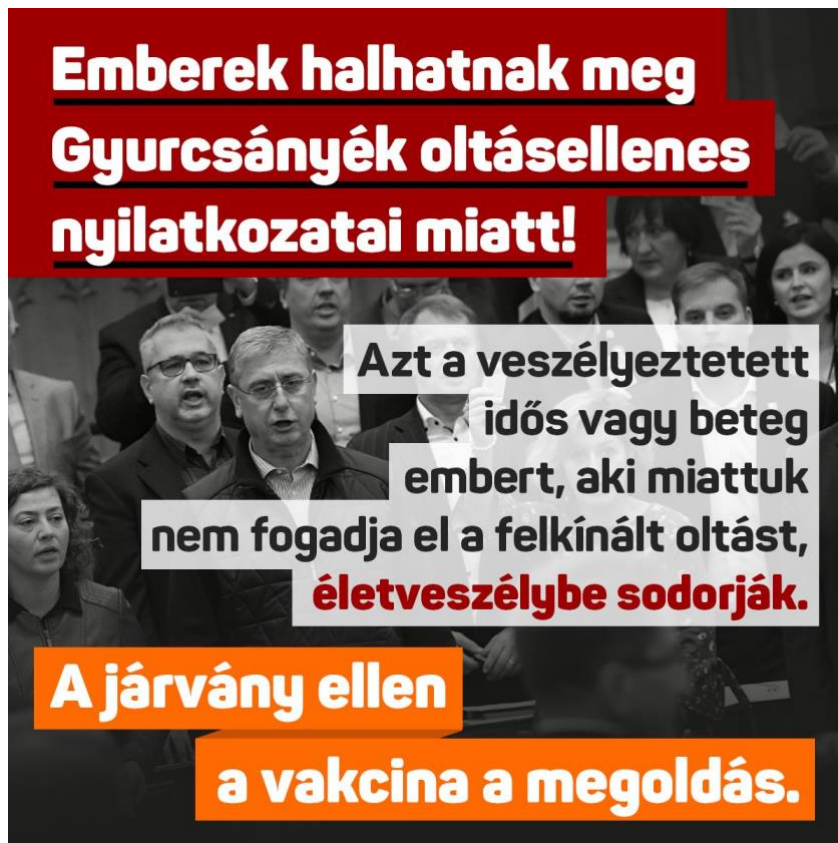


Image 1 shows opposition politicians with Ferenc Gyurcsány in the centre. The caption to the image reads "People could die because of statements made by Gyurcsány and his friends! They would put at risk, elderly or sick person who does not accept a vaccination because of them in life-threatening danger. Vaccination is the solution to the pandemic."

Orbán himself remained distant from the detail of the Krekó interview apparently relying on proxies to keep the story alive. The Krekó story was easily incorporated into the sense of crisis that Fidesz had concocted around the pandemic, concretising the somewhat abstract 'left' in a single identity. Krekó's image was widely distributed across state TV, Fidesz social and print media and he was established as one of the left's "... biggest villains in decades"⁶⁵. Orbán, in contrast, continually presented himself and Fidesz's pandemic strategy as invoking a national interest, somehow beyond politics often under the guise of 'Every Life Matters' a rebuke to global left-liberalism.

⁶⁴ Magyarforum, Facebook, March 15th 2021.

⁶⁵ Magyar Nemzet, January 5th 2021.

Image 2⁶⁶



Image 2 shows a still of Orbán in a 'Good Morning Hungary' interview with the caption "Every life matters, we will fight for every life". Orbán blamed the Hungarian opposition for politicising vaccination despite his own persistent exploitation of the pandemic.

*"Health care and people's lives mustn't be regarded as a political issue...the Opposition – the Left – have gone too far here. They've crossed boundaries which for reasons of humanity ... stand above politics..."*⁶⁷

As Laclau highlights, the populist leader is paramount in sustaining the myth of saving the (kin)nation from treacherous *Others*. Orbán has been a vital presence in Hungary's pandemic response and he has carefully managed the deployment of expertise. Ádám notes⁶⁸ that for 'illiberal authoritarian populists' it can prove difficult to delegate responsibility to 'experts' especially if primary political success is based on an intimacy with 'the people'. Bene and Boda⁶⁹ argue that an ambiguous relationship existed between Orbán and medical experts. As Orbán had suggested "... the professors are pulling at the hem of my

⁶⁶ Facebook, Zoltán Kovács (Secretary of State for International Communication and Relations, Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, November 13th 2020.

⁶⁷ Orbán, V. (j) "Good Morning Hungary" February 5th 2021.

⁶⁸ Ádám, Z. "Ultra-orthodoxy and selective voluntarism: How did the Orbán regime react to the first wave of the pandemic?" *European Policy Analysis*, 6(2), (2020)277-292.

⁶⁹ Bene, M., & Boda, Z. "Hungary: Crisis as Usual—Populist Governance and the Pandemic". In *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe* eds Giuliano Bobba and Nicolas Hubé (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) 87-100.

jacket telling me to be cautious...but I have common sense and I know how one should mount a defence campaign in a time of crisis.”⁷⁰ Orbán’s popular epistemology - ‘common sense’ - roots him in the native soil of the Hungarian people. Expertise seems acceptable providing it does not obstruct action⁷¹ or support opposition political interests.⁷²

Orbán’s increasing use of social media indicated its importance in communicating key messages about Covid. Weekly Kossuth Rádió interviews contributed to crafting Orbán’s persona across a hybrid media environment. In an increasingly sophisticated cross-media presence, Orbán is portrayed as an exceptional everyman, full of folksy charm, an international statesman who still finds time to send telegrams and pick tulips for his mother (Orbán’s Instagram and Fidesz Facebook stream) between combatting the perils of Covid, immigration and globalism. Orbán’s social media accounts form a complex and curious amalgam of political gravitas, the mundane and sentimental, combining images of statesmanship, Christian iconography, sports fandom, parochialism, and hegemonic ‘strong-man’ masculinity, seemingly aimed at sustaining charismatic appeal to an established conservative support base.

Since 2019, Fidesz and Orbán’s growing cross-media presence has developed through formats including Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. This intertextuality aims at a coherent message that moves between heralding a political Christianity⁷³, attacking a migrant threat, supporting the Hungarian family, asserting Euro-scepticism and, on Orbán’s personal pages, support for sports teams and intimately staged family occasions. These sometimes comprise short videos with Orbán addressing his supporters directly, often shot directly to camera, sometimes on the street. These videos, shared across social media platforms, had a critical function in early and later stages of the political pandemic responses. Two video posts, bookend the first and third waves and demonstrate the centrality of Orbán’s direct style in

⁷⁰ Orbán, V. (f) “*Good Morning Hungary*”, May 8th 2020.

⁷¹ For example, legislation (the so-called ‘paedophile law’) ostensibly designed to protect children and provide for stringent action against abusers implicitly rejected expertise related to sexuality and relationships education in favour of parents’ responsibility and relying, presumably, on their ‘common sense’.

⁷² Expertise linked to political interests inevitably becomes politicised, Csörgő Z. „Populism and the crisis of expertise”, *Intersections East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 7 (3) 29-35.

⁷³ Supplanting what normally stands as ‘policy’, Fidesz narratives are consolidated around discourses of family, national sovereignty, individual responsibility and a politicised and identitarian Christianity exemplified by Fidesz’s rehabilitation of inter-war leader Miklós Horthy’s exclusionary Christian nationalism.⁷³ Orbán has sought to position himself as the defender of a pure Christian Europe upholding Hungary’s historic destiny as *antemurale christianitatis*. Hungary’s Christian identity is acknowledged in the 2011 Constitution, the ‘Fundamental Law of Hungary’. That establishes both national identity *and* advances claims to European legitimacy and rootedness whilst resisting aspects of Western modernity, especially policies associated with inward migration and multi-culturalism.

creating a sense of intimacy as Orbán addresses and speaks unmediated to his public. For example, in the first wave ‘At the end of a hard day’ (March 13th 2020), Orbán appears with unbuttoned shirt collar at his desk. The tone is informal, sombre and sobering. It marked Orbán’s first full engagement with the depth and seriousness of the crisis and his political response, offering a ‘state of play’ account of the pandemic in Hungary. This video acquired over 1.2 million hits on Facebook alone.

Image 3: At the end of a hard day, March 2020



Over 14 months later, another short video (Image 4) posted May 27th 2021, suggested that the crisis was over, at least for now. A masked and suited Orbán directly addresses camera in Budapest’s Castle district. He proclaims the success of the Fidesz-led pandemic response (ignoring Hungary’s high mortality) before flamboyantly ripping off his mask and draping it over the camera with a loud ‘*Goodbye dear mask!*’ in English, whilst celebrating achieving five million vaccinations.

Image 4 Goodbye dear mask! May 2021



The message is clear for both Hungarian and global audiences: normality resumes, at least, for Hungary. Orbán has liberated the Hungarian people from restrictive masks and other constraints. This political rhetoric resumed in subsequent media posts with a return to the familiar territory of Fidesz's ethno-nationalism. These highlight Hungary's miraculous economic recovery and attacked familiar and new enemies. We should note that 'old' enemies (migrants, Soros, the EU) were not abandoned during the pandemic but assailed with renewed vigour. These themes were continuously referenced in Orbán's weekly radio interviews, clips of which are reproduced on social media accounts quickening intertextual flow and expanding reach to both on and offline audiences.

It would be naïve to reduce Fidesz's success to Orbán alone, yet his constant trans-media presence suggests the embodiment of a contemporary *Magyarság*. His carefully curated radio interviews offer a rehearsed and characteristically populist mode of communication in which Orbán updates the nation on current political matters, a form of 'people's information update', without however, serious scrutiny or accounting. Naturally, the pandemic has been high-profile in these broadcasts. Orbán's interviews are intimate, folksy and exude an apparently rooted 'common sense' and reassurance that all is or will be well. They create a sense of proximity with the Prime Minister who presents himself variously as leader, politician, 'street fighter', village boy, fellow citizen, 'one of us'. They are a key component in sustaining charisma in the relationship between Orbán and what he understands as his people. His reliance on simplification of complex political problems, his endorsement of half-truths, his exclusionary politics and his appeal to a mythologised

nationalist authenticity exemplifies what some have regarded a (male) populist demagoguery.⁷⁴

Despite Orbán's apparent good humour in his social media presence, much Fidesz discourse betrays a persistent and simmering resentment invariably aimed either at a composite 'Left' or 'the West' (and its various agents) and seeking to re-establish Hungary in what is imagined as its rightful place. A persistent and "... *quixotic struggle of wish against fact*"⁷⁵ dominates. It is difficult to know whether present Fidesz bitterness is triggered by misrecognition, the (ironic) desire for *more* recognition,⁷⁶ a sense of cultural inferiority in the EU⁷⁷ or a melancholia deriving from unresolved historical trauma. Some scholars argue that a hatred of the *other* has consistently provided legitimacy for Hungarian political regimes since the early twentieth century.⁷⁸ Hatred seems painfully present now.

Conclusions: Hungary and Covid Myths

Hungary's Covid experience has been tragic. In excess of 45,000 deaths are attributed to the virus, Hungary cited at one point as having the highest mortality rate per million population in the world.⁷⁹ However, media reports suggested that many Hungarians were either unaware of these figures or were satisfied with the government's pandemic responses.⁸⁰ Media attention (Fidesz-friendly media especially) in early 2021 focused on Hungary's vaccination rather than mortality rate, allowing the Hungarian pandemic strategy to be presented as

⁷⁴ Berend, Iván T. *A Century of Populist Demagogues, Eighteen European Portraits 1918-2018* (Budapest, CEU Press, 2020). In his account of fascism, Stanley refers to fascist leaders (describing Orbán as such) replacing factual history with a mythologised account of the past, Stanley, J. *How Fascism Works. The Politics of Us and Them* (New York, Random House, 2018).

⁷⁵ Bibó, 1946, 161.

⁷⁶ Fraser, N. "Rethinking Recognition", *New Left Review*, 3, May/June 2000.

⁷⁷ Krastev I. & Holmes S. "Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and its Discontents". *Journal of Democracy*, 29 (3) (2018) 117-128; Böröcz J. and Sarkar M. "The Unbearable Whiteness of the Polish Plumber and the Hungarian Peacock Dance around 'Race'", *Slavic Review*, 76 (2) (2017) 307 – 314

⁷⁸ Hadas, M "The Culture of Distrust. On the Hungarian National Habitus", *Hungarian Historical Research* 45 (1) (2020) 129-152.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (<http://www.healthdata.org>) or Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu>).

⁸⁰ NLC, 'A magyar szavazók többsége nincs tisztában a valós járványhelyzettel', (Most Hungarian voters are unaware of the real pandemic situation), April 15th 2021 <https://nlc.hu/egeszseg/20210415/a-magyar-szavazok-tobbsege-nincs-tisztaban-a-valos-jarvanyhelyzettel/> Accessed September 21st 2021; Czene, G. „Propagandával vezényelt vírusháború folyik” („A virus propaganda war is going on”), *Népszava*, April 17th 2021 https://nepszava.hu/3116649_propagandaval-vezenyelt-virushaboru-folyik accessed September 21st 2021.

successful. The significance of mortality figures has yet to be publicly scrutinised although Orbán's statement in September 2020 that "... *The Government measures success in the number of lives saved* " is ironic. In practice, Fidesz-friendly media reporting during 2021 indicated that vaccination rates were the key metric but, by Autumn 2021, those had stalled to a level below the EU average. While lives were certainly saved, very many were lost.

The pandemic emerged in an unsettled political period in Hungary. As well as the 2022 Parliamentary election, recurrent conflict with the EU, controversial dependencies on Russia and China and wavering voter support contributed to a sense that Fidesz was under political pressure. Mythologising practices formed a central part of its pandemic response, and the pandemic was used to further cement its position in anticipation of the 2022 election. Covid has been relentlessly politicised as hegemony necessitates persistent work in the domains of the imaginary and symbolic as well as the economic. Mythologisation entails *active* work and underlines myth's performativity rather than being a static or fixed narrative. Fidesz mythology relies on polarities that contrast aspects of the exceptional, heroic or authentic (Orbán, Hungary or the 'Hungarian people', for example, and exemplified in Hungary's national football team's performance in the 2021 UEFA Championships⁸¹) with unexceptional *others*.

Without *others*, with which exceptionalism has a parasitic relationship, the exceptional cannot exist and *others*' careful categorisation is a vital part of populist mythologising practice. Fidesz relies on proxies (Magyar Nemzet or Zsolt Bayer, for example) to distribute representations of otherness across the media environment, undertaking the discursive dirty work of politics that might discredit its politicians but from which they draw political capital. This emphasises binaries (roughly between friend and enemy) through which Fidesz creates or contests political identities. The discursive and symbolic construction of 'the Left' in Hungary as an entity of *otherness* is essential to Fidesz's political project, especially before a Parliamentary election. The catch-all category of 'the Left' (which currently has no significant practical presence in Hungarian politics) is a composite imaginary of social democratic, centrist and centre-right/left positions and politicians. It was an essential discursive tool in attempting to counter and disarm the opposition's belief that multi-party coalition (as in the 2019 municipal elections) was the most likely means to challenge Fidesz's parliamentary power in 2022.

⁸¹ The so-called 'paedophile law', introduced simultaneously with the Championships, conflated paedophilia with homosexuality, attracting huge criticism with opposing players sporting rainbow armbands and stadia lit with rainbow colours as a clear rebuke to Orbán who celebrated the Hungarian team's performances.

Invariably ambiguity exists around symbolic others; they cannot always hold a fixed identity or a ‘perpetual otherness’. Designating, re-mythologising and mythologising new *others* in a process of renewal is essential. Indeed, the spirit of Carl Schmitt’s ‘friend/enemy’ polarity is ubiquitous in Orbán’s worldview and politics and has been conspicuous in the pandemic.⁸² It entailed relentless exaggeration and designation of enemies, and a “*fabulization*”⁸³ of Covid’s dramas through media story-telling and narrative construction intended to shape experience by addressing those involved. One example was the procurement of Chinese and Russian vaccines that pitted resolute and competitive Hungary against EU lethargy in a life and death struggle to protect the exceptional Nation, heroic political action resulting in assertions of success.

The pandemic has created spaces in which Fidesz mythologising has expanded. Orbán’s political skill lies partially in a capacity to mythologise, using specific instances of the ordinary, everyday and profane (for example, the entry of migrants to Hungary or resistance to the EU) to invoke the sacred and transcendent, especially in the form of ‘traditional’ Hungary. The underlying tension between always imagined tradition and its other, modernity, is recurrently played out in Hungarian cultural politics and transmitted across a hybridised media environment in a regime of representation rendering stable political messages. Hungarian experiences of neo-liberal globalism in the post-communist period have made tradition, especially that associated with religion and ethnicity, seem a plausible defence against the ontological anxieties associated with modernity. The discrediting of a collective national project based in liberalism and the attraction of memorialised identities (politicised Christian monarchical narratives or mythologised earlier political regimes, for example) registered in terms of a rigid politics of family, sexuality, church and nation risks decay into fundamentalism, a kind of “... *necrophilia, in love with the dead letter of the text.*”⁸⁴ Fundamentalist terror derives from the ambiguity and contingency implied by the presence of the other. Myth promises to resolve such ambiguity or contradiction, sometimes by diversion, yet it invites literalness, its simplicity invoking a sense that “... *it is I whom it has come to seek*”.⁸⁵ Hungarian exceptionalism, the polluting *other*, alien treachery, betrayal

⁸² See, for example, Mészáros G. “Carl Schmitt in Hungary: Constitutional Crisis in the Shadow of Covid-19”, *MTA Law Working Papers*, Budapest, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2020.

⁸³ Turner, V. “Social Dramas in Brazilian Umbanda: The dialectics of Meaning”, in Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988).

⁸⁴ Eagleton, T. *After Theory*, (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

⁸⁵ Barthes, R. *Mythologies*, (London: Granada, 1973).

and Hungarian victimhood bolster Fidesz's attempts to wrench a narrative of tradition from an encroaching liberal modernity. Myths of purity and purification, especially, are narrative forms that become attractive in the attempt to counter this.⁸⁶

Similar views to those prevailing in Hungary have emerged elsewhere in the world. Prior to parliamentary elections in France and Italy, for example, political disenchantment apparently underlies rightward moves within the EU. Despite Fidesz's landslide win in the 2022 parliamentary election, the impact of economic downturn (weakening currency, high inflation, steeply rising commodity prices) suggests significant departure from a *putative* economic stability in Hungary since 2010 and underpinning Fidesz's power. This, and the consequences of inherent contradictions in Hungarian society, will undoubtedly shape Fidesz and Hungary's future.

⁸⁶ Myths of purification contain dangers. Across Europe suicide and mental health problems experienced by *othered* or unsupported LGBTQ+ young people are one relevant example in a Hungary where the 'purification' of sexuality has assumed great political significance.