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Seongcheol Kim

8. Hungary

Populism in Hungary has been a subject of international attention especially in the past decade, one that began with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz winning an unprecedented two-thirds majority of seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections. While Fidesz had featured a social-populist discourse pitting 'the people' and 'the new majority' against 'the aristocracy' in power following then-PM Ferenc Gyurcsány's infamous 'Őszöd speech' of 2006, Orbán's outfit now shifted gears onto an institutionalist⁷⁵ discourse of national harmony rather than antagonistic division and, following its landslide victory, declared in a parliamentary resolution that 'national unity' had prevailed and that the voters had given the party a mandate to institute a 'System of National Cooperation' (NER) founded on 'peace, freedom, and accord.'⁷⁶ What has been characteristic for Fidesz's post-2010 discourse is an authoritarian institutionalism of enacting an exclusive claim to the 'nation' in a methodical, administrative, largely non-antagonistic manner via two-thirds majority while effectively ignoring or bypassing (rather than seeking direct confrontation with) opposition. Populism takes on an instituting function for this institutionalism by making the boundaries of the new order intelligible, having previously defined the Other of 'the people' (albeit not in authoritarian terms at the time) as a small, privileged, discredited 'aristocracy.' Similarly, the 'Stop Soros' campaign that climaxed with the 2018 elections represents a phase in which populism, in close conjunction with nationalism and nativism, re-emerges in Fidesz's discourse to re-define the identity of 'the nation' against ever newer enemies in the form of the Soros 'empire' and its alleged agents at home and abroad.

In short, Fidesz's post-2010 rule is characterized by a constant interplay between moments of the political as antagonism (of which populism is one possible manifestation) and a non-antagonistic institutionalized normality of 'business as usual.' The same holds for the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As widely reported in international media, the two-thirds Fidesz majority in parliament adopted on 30 March a so-called 'Enabling Act' granting the government emergency powers without any kind of built-in time limit, which made the law unusual among its European counterparts. Importantly, the government decided to put the bill up for an early vote on 23 March, requiring a four-fifths majority under the rules of procedure, which it then predictably lost. By designing the emergency legislation so as to make it unacceptable for the entire spectrum of opposition parties – from Jobbik to the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) – and then forcing an early vote that it knew it would lose, Fidesz effectively staged an antagonistic frontier of government vs. opposition as the founding moment of the COVID-19 crisis regime: the government defending the emergency legislation in terms of 'national unity' on the one hand, the opposition supposedly placing itself outside 'the nation' by opposing the law on the other – and Orbán smugly telling opposition MPs that 'we are going to resolve this crisis even without you.'⁷⁷

It is in this discursive context that Fidesz's otherwise run-of-the-mill, holding-together institutionalism during the pandemic – with slogans such as 'Let's take care of each other' – appears in a not so innocuous light: the 'we' or 'us' implies a founding exclusion of those who refused to work in the interest of 'national unity' in the hour of greatest need. Fidesz politician and president of the parliament László Kövér only made this implicit exclusion blatantly explicit

⁷⁵ Understood here following Laclau as a conceptual opposite of populism: whereas the latter constructs an antagonistic division in society (between a popular subject and a power bloc), institutionalism produces a non-antagonistic image of society as a field of differences. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 2005, London: Verso.

⁷⁶ Office of the National Assembly, 'The Programme of National Cooperation,' 22 May 2010, https://www.parlament.hu/irom39/00047/00047_e.pdf (accessed 18 May 2020).

⁷⁷ Marianna Biró, 'Orbán: Ezt a válságot önök nélkül is meg fogjuk oldani,' *Index.hu*, 23 March 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/23/parlament/orban_holnap_reggel_visszavehetik_ha_ugy_latjak/ (accessed 18 May 2020).

when he claimed in an April interview that '[t]his opposition is not part of the Hungarian nation' for opposing the Enabling Act and courting international criticism of the government:

Above all, let's recognize clearly that on this matter, the international objection and the domestic opposition criticism do not differ. The two are one and the same. The Hungarian left-liberal opposition is part of the global, anti-national network, the Western European opinion-makers base their own propaganda campaign on its deliberately false information and slander.⁷⁸

To be sure, the logic of this exclusion is hardly a populist, but rather an authoritarian nationalist one that delegitimizes opponents as foreign-like and 'anti-national'⁷⁹ – a recurring strain in Fidesz's discourse since the 1990s. A conspiracist populism of accusing the global mega-rich powers-that-be, such as Bill Gates or indeed George Soros, of spreading COVID-19 – a claim commonly heard in the weekly 'Corona demonstrations' in German cities – has not been the message of the Fidesz government; instead, the latter's accusations have been directed at an opposition allegedly failing to stick with 'the nation' in the moment of crisis. This strategy is a telling one given how party competition in Hungary has been slowly but surely shifting toward a pro- vs. anti-NER logic, with the liberal parties and Jobbik rallying behind unity candidates to score numerous successes in the 2019 local elections (as well as the parliamentary by-election in Dunaújváros, Jobbik's lone single-member-district win from the 2018 elections). Yet the NER as a hegemonic formation is predicated on a differential, fragmented opposition that cannot form a united front against Fidesz – a barrier that now finally appears to be crumbling. In designating the entire opposition as a unitary anti-national bloc – including its erstwhile far-right (and now increasingly de-radicalized) competitor Jobbik – Fidesz is getting a head start on what was already expected to be a dirty and hard-fought 2022 election campaign, in which the reproduction of the two-thirds majority order against a more united opposition will be at stake.

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⁷⁸ 'Bunkerben várják a csodafegyvert,' *Demokrata*, 28 April 2020, <https://demokrata.hu/magyarorszag/bunkerben-varjak-a-csodafegyvert-2-237021> (accessed 18 May 2020).

⁷⁹ For the conceptual distinction between populism and nationalism, see also Benjamin De Cleen & Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,' *Javnost*, 24(4), 2017, pp. 301-319.