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HUNGARY

Illiberal crisis management¹

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Political context

The ruling Fidesz–KDNP parties won a two-thirds supermajority in the National Assembly three elections in a row since 2010. However, in the local elections of 2019 Fidesz suffered sensitive losses unprecedented since the birth of the regime, and when united, the opposition proved it could win in several larger cities including the capital. While there is extensive public and academic debate about the character of the Orbán-regime, its illiberal nature is widely accepted including by Prime Minister (PM), Viktor Orbán himself in his famous speech in 2014 (Buzogány, 2017: 1307–1308). To support the ideal of the illiberal state, the ruling coalition often uses the label ‘liberal’ against the critics of the government, by which it proves that they are defending the nation from mainstream international actors that would sell out the country to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or other transnational institutions. These conflicts are often framed in crisis narratives such as the lingering economic collapse of 2008 or the refugee/migration wave of 2015 (see Körösnéyi et al., 2020). The crises are utilised to justify campaigns against the so-called liberal mainstream such as ‘Brussels,’ NGOs, international media, the Obama-administration or George Soros. The most durable campaigns were against immigration and included billboards, radio, TV and internet ads raising awareness of the risks of uncontrolled immigration. The government often initiates ‘national consultation’ in topics that are owned by the government which become government-sponsored opinion polls with the entire population as its sample. The results of consultations are used to strengthen the narrative of a strong and credible government defending Hungarian people’s interests.

Chronology

At the early phase, the Operational Group (OG) responsible for the control of COVID-19 was set up by government decree the end of January. The course of events is summarised in Table 24.1.

From January, the first cases in China were described in Hungarian newspapers as a ‘mysterious respiratory disease.’ The opposition news dealt a lot with the spreading of the virus, while pro-government media were more sceptical about it, often claiming that it was less dangerous than it was presented in the international and opposition news. Also, pro-government media outlets often accused opposition media of devoting too much attention to it and causing unjustified panic. The Prime Minister also claimed at the end of February that ‘At present the coronavirus is attracting all the attention, but the historic challenge we’re living with continues to be migration’ (Kormany.hu, 2020a; see also Kormany.hu, 2020b). The government argued there was enough protective equipment in health care facilities for effective defence, a claim frequently challenged by the opposition. A recurring concern on the pro-government side during this first phase was the presence of fake news around the topic.

During the second phase, after the first cases were confirmed, a dominant topic on the pro-government side was the link between illegal migration and the coronavirus epidemic, which was fuelled by the fact that the first cases were students from Iran. This link was highly challenged by the opposition camp. At the same time, the opposition media and Hungarian Medical Chamber (MOK) warned ‘the already squeezed Hungarian healthcare faces the coronavirus without reserves’ (Sarkadi, 2020). However, it was highly disputed and attacked by the government and the pro-government media who highlighted the country and health care system was well prepared. Effective protection against the virus and the need for various restrictions became an important topic in this period.

In the third phase, after the first restrictions were announced on March 11, the pro-government side emphasised the importance of national unity and strongly attacked the opposition for threatening this. Also, the timing and determination of government action were praised. Meanwhile, the opposition media argued the quality of government communication was insufficient, and often challenged government measures and their implementation. At the end of March, the so-called ‘Enabling’ or *COVID-19 Act* sparked strong criticism and protests by internal and non-domestic opponents of the regime. They warned the law contravened essential human rights and fundamental freedoms. In contrast, the pro-government side emphasised the necessity for effective defence and claimed the European elite, international liberal mainstream, NGOs and Hungarian opposition, which they aligned with George Soros, were making a coordinated political attack intending to bring down the Hungarian government.

From April, a further central discourse was the conflict between the government and Gergely Karácsony, the opposition mayor of Budapest. Referring to the high number of infections in a nursing home in Budapest, the pro-government

TABLE 24.1 Hungary chronology

Date	Diffusion of COVID-19	Key official actions	Key communication events
January 30		Start Phase 1. The Operational Group (OG) is formed.	
March 4	COVID-19 reaches Hungary: two infected Iranian citizens studying in Hungary.	Start Phase 2. COVID-19 reaches Hungary.	Orbán, in a conference call with the European Union heads of state and government, draws attention to the economic impacts and the connections between the coronavirus and migration.
11	The number of infections is 13.	Start Phase 3. After the Operational Group proposed the emergency order to the government, the government proclaims a state of emergency (including stay-at-home order) in the entire country.	
13			Viktor Orbán announced in a live Facebook video address that the schools, kindergartens and nurseries will be closed, and remote teaching will start.
15	The first patient dies.		
16		Schools, kindergartens, baby day care close.	
21	The number of new infections: 103 people. 7 cured and 4 died from the virus.		Viktor Orbán's Facebook page gained more than 200 thousand new followers (the final number is above 1 million by the end of the first wave).

(Continued)

TABLE 24.1 (Continued)

Date	Diffusion of COVID-19	Key official actions	Key communication events
23	The opposition votes against the urgency of the time-unlimited coronavirus law that is often referred to as the 'Enabling' Act by the critics.		
30	With 138 votes for, and 53 against, the Hungarian Parliament passes the 'Enabling' or <i>COVID-19 Act</i> and President János Áder signs the bill in record time.		
31	The government announces that they would release the infection map which shows that most of the infections happened in the capital and the county around the city.		
4	On the 4th and the 6th, the government announces its economic and epidemic protection program.		
9		The Prime Minister announces that the curfew would be extended indefinitely.	
13	The number of infected people is 1,458, death number is at 109.		
29	1,891 active cases in Hungary.	Prime Minister announces in his Facebook video address that the restart of the country can begin without Budapest and its surrounding areas. As the outbreak is the most intense in the mentioned territories, the stay-at-home order remains in effect in the capital and Pest county.	

- May 3 The expected peak. Fatalities rise to 340. 629 have recovered. 2,029 active cases; 2,998 registered infected.
- 15 'I felt important now that I manage this defence personally' – Viktor Orbán said in a radio interview.
- 16 Restrictions would be eased in Budapest from the 18th, Viktor Orbán announces on Facebook.
- 18 The prevalence of COVID-19 infections is low in Hungary, according to a joint, representative study of medical universities.
- 27 The repeal of the 'enabling' or coronavirus law is submitted to the parliament and accepted on June 16.
- June 18 The number of confirmed cases: 4,079. 568 deaths, 2,564 had recovered. The number of active infections is 947. 199 cases require hospital, 15 on ventilators.
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side heavily attacked the mayor arguing he was personally responsible for this central hub of the pandemic. However, Karácsony claimed the municipality acted prudently, they purchased tests and protective equipment, as the government did not ensure these, and government did not inform him properly about the situation.

Another controversial topic was the decision of the Minister of Human Resources to evacuate at least 60% of publicly funded hospital beds to make space for COVID-19 patients. In response, the government referred to its philosophy of 'prepare for the worst but hope for the best' as this way they could avoid situations seen in other Western countries. In contrast, the opposition attacked the government for ignoring chronic patients falling out of the shrinking health care system.

Another highly discussed topic was the European and global political consequences and lessons of the pandemic. The pro-government side often claimed the failure of the Western liberal world and contrasted it with the success of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. They also argued that the coronavirus showed the inefficiency of the European Union (EU) in a crisis. The crisis could only be handled by strong nation-states and real political leaders, and the most effective form of international collaboration during the crisis is the bilateral cooperation between countries. They also claimed that these lessons should have long-term consequences on the global and European political order. On the other hand, the opposition side often stressed that many European countries acted faster or more efficiently than Hungary.

Social network sites, especially Facebook, were intensively used by political actors, media outlets and ordinary citizens during the crisis. This is well illustrated by the fact that one of the most important information resources of the crisis, Viktor Orbán's Facebook page, gained more than 200 thousand new followers during the first weeks of the crisis, and his Instagram account was also heavily used. On the one hand, Facebook has become one of the most important information resources for citizens as the heightened engagement over this topic made countless related information pieces widely visible. At the same time, numerous fake news items also spread widely. Many of them were unveiled and corrected by mainstream media outlets, and in several cases, the police arrested the publishers of fake news by the means of the newly enacted *COVID-19 Act*. A few of these incidents provoked lively controversy in the public about the state of freedom of speech and its alleged violation. On the other hand, social media platforms were efficient tools for ordinary citizens to organise their work and life while maintaining social distance. Solidarity and civic political self-organisation actions were prevalent on the platform. Several groups coordinated voluntary and supportive actions but protests against the controversial *COVID-19 Act* including petitions and an online protest event also took place on the platform.

Analysis

One of the most important features of Hungarian crisis management was the clear prominence of Viktor Orbán's leadership during the pandemic. This is

not surprising since Köröseyi et al. (2020) demonstrate that crisis discourse, whether exogenous or endogenous, is an inherent feature of the Orbán-regime. This is what triggers the emergence of the charismatic leadership that the regime is based on (p. 38). Nonetheless, at the first latent phase of the crisis before the virus broke into the country, the Prime Minister seemed to stay away from the COVID-19 topic. However, since the virus reached Hungary, Orbán soon became the prime decision-maker, information resource and face of the Hungarian crisis management.

Orbán's main communication platform was his own Facebook page where he kept his followers informed about day-to-day crisis management. The most important information was delivered in video format in his own words, from the first death through the restrictions and regulations to the economic measures, often from his office. Further, as is usual in general, the Prime Minister gave more detailed interviews on each Friday on the national radio, where he offered more elaborate explanations for measures and evaluations of the current situation and its political context. His third main communication platform was the parliament where he directly answered opposition critics five times until the end of May. Overall, the PM's communication on these platforms largely shaped the public discourse around COVID-19 as the most important information of the crisis and arguments for its management appeared in his posts which in turn were echoed frequently on both sides of the political spectrum. Even the government's crisis management advertisement campaign and the main slogans used during the pandemic were built around Orbán's speeches.

Beyond this discursive dominance, the prominence of leadership was manifested in the one-man and highly hierarchical decision-making structure. This was explicitly claimed by Orbán in one of his radio interviews: 'I felt it important that I now manage this defence personally' (Mediaklikk, 2020b). From the beginning of the crisis, he kept talking about measures in the first person singular as his own decisions. However, this one-person decision-making, responsibility-taking, omnipotent role does not mean an omnicompetent image of leadership. Orbán often emphasised he is not competent in managing pandemics and viruses, therefore his main task as a leader is to collect all scientific evidence and expert opinions on the topic. However, these expert opinions are not able to directly lead political measures, these should be decided and made by the leader drawing upon his common sense, properly informed by evidence and scientific predictions. He explicitly justified the one-man leadership of the crisis management by this argument when he continued the above-cited sentence about his leadership: 'And this is not because I'm competent in health care policy – I cannot be accused of it-, but I have common sense' (Mediaklikk, 2020b).

For these reasons, the constant, active and information-collecting presence is an important part of his leadership image which was primarily and intensively reported on his Facebook and Instagram page. Several short video spots showed him unexpectedly visiting hospitals² and other state institutions where he was shown asking for information from the directors, staff or even patients. He said

in one radio interview that even if these visits may be unnecessary from a rational point of view, ‘my instinct suggests that I have to go’ (Mediaklikk, 2020a) to collect information. Also, many posts portrayed official meetings with experts and staff members. The image of hard-working leadership was depicted by the timing of these events, often recorded in the description of social media posts. Many posts reported meetings in the very early morning and the late at night, and even on Easter Sunday morning the PM visited a hospital in the countryside.

This charisma-based and hard-working leadership image was further emphasised by contrasting his political activity with other political actors. While these contrasts appeared mostly in the communication of other governmental politicians and pro-government media, in some cases Orbán highlighted some contrasting points himself. The main contrast was drawn with the opposition party mayor of the capital, Gergely Karácsony, who was shown as an indecisive, responsibility-avoiding, inactive leader who was mostly communicating rather than acting during the crisis. An explicit contrast was evident when Orbán said in one of his radio interviews that Karácsony is a ‘theoretical-minded’ leader who may be able to write ‘great studies’ about the events, but was unable to make effective and firm decisions. Orbán argued that the management of a crisis requires ‘practical-minded’ leaders who can act and take responsibility (Mediaklikk, 2020c).

Another characteristic contrast was often made with the political class of the European Union who were claimed to be ineffective in crisis management but active in ‘political attacks’ against the ‘country.’ This contrast was made explicitly by Orbán when he kept claiming in interviews and open letters to European leaders that he did not have time to deal with political critics and controversies during the crisis, because effective crisis management requires all the energies he has. Recurring further contrasts were drawn with the crisis management of the previous left-wing governments that were shown as wrong and ineffective as opposed to Orbán’s successful management of the crisis, but this contrast was mostly related to the economic measures.

A last but important feature of the crisis leadership of Orbán is the personal style of his communication. On his social media communication, ordinary people, personal stories and remarks and celebrities often appeared and, in his interviews, he often talked about the everyday difficulties and pleasures of ordinary people in a rather personal way. Overall, he used a highly mundane language to explain measures, political dilemmas and complicated arguments.

Beyond Orbán, one of the other prominent actors during the crisis was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, whose main issues included bringing back Hungarian citizens stuck abroad, coordinating the foreign, mainly Chinese, acquisition of protective equipment and the donations to other countries, and especially liaising with Hungarian communities beyond the borders. The performances in these areas were presented as some of the most important political achievements during the crisis, and they were intensively communicated across several platforms. These messages fit well with the main official

slogans of the crisis management such as ‘no Hungarian is alone’ and ‘every Hungarian is responsible for every Hungarian.’ Péter Szijjártó was also active in the international defence of the Hungarian government’s position on the question of the *COVID-19 Act*. In this area, other members of the government such as the Minister of Justice, Judit Varga and the State Secretary of International Communication and Relations, Zoltán Kovács were also prominent and appeared on several international media outlets to react to international critics. In turn, these reactions have become important reference points in the domestic discourse to show how the government was struggling with international political ‘attacks.’ Ministers responsible for the economy were also prominent actors during the crisis, concerning their specific areas. However, it is noticeable that members of the government officially responsible for the health care policy were hardly visible in the public discourse.

An important actor in official communication was the Operational Group (OG); one of their most important tasks was day-to-day information provision through daily press conferences and on an online website. Although the members who publicly represented the OG were leaders of law enforcement bodies and health care professionals rather than politicians, the judgement of their work was divisive in the public discourse. While the pro-government public was supportive of their work and personalities, the opposition discourse was more critical of the quality of the information provided.

Another main actor was Gergely Karácsony, the opposition party mayor of the capital. Besides his contrasting role to the Prime Minister, he was highly critical of the crisis management of the government, but sometimes he publicly expressed his support for some of its measures. He also heavily used his Facebook page to react to his critics and defend his position, attack the government and present his city-level crisis management often as a contrast to the government’s approach.

Experts and scientists were prominent actors during the crisis. On the one hand, both pro- and anti-government media outlets were keen to give space for experts such as virologists, doctors and economists. However, media outlets selected experts carefully based on their political leanings. In the pro-government media outlets, only experts who were supportive of government measures appeared, while in the opposition media outlets experts who were critical of government were given a platform. On the other hand, as discussed above, the government also drew extensively upon experts, even if the PM made it clear their expertise cannot replace political decisions. Nonetheless, Orbán often referred to the opinions and advice of experts when explaining his decisions, and while the latter provoked much criticism from the opposition, the underlying expert arguments were rarely challenged.

Although there were no major contradictions of information provided by officials, some decisions caused confusion. For instance, originally the government was against the closure of schools, kindergartens and baby nurseries. On the morning of the day when the PM announced the closures, he argued on the

national radio that closures are not necessary as it would endanger the school year, teachers would go on unpaid leave and parents would stay home to take care of their children. However, at 9 pm, Orbán announced in a live Facebook video address that the schools, kindergartens and nurseries would close, and remote teaching would start.

Further confusion was caused by territorial infection data. At the beginning of the epidemic, this information was not made public. Mayors, heads of regional or municipal institutions and ordinary citizens published some data based on the knowledge they had alone. At the end of March, the infection map was released. But otherwise, the messages from officials regarding the threat and the handling of the crisis and the objectives of the measures were clear.

Since mid-May, the government has kept declaring the Hungarian management of the crisis was incredibly successful. While many oppositional actors reject this claim, according to some of the polls, crisis management is positively evaluated by the majority of the voters (HVG, 2020). At the end of May, Viktor Orbán announced the government would launch a 'national consultation' about the management of the crisis. It is highly likely this will validate this leadership further.

Notes

- 1 The research was supported by the Incubator program of the Center for Social Sciences, Eötvös Loránd Research Network (project number: 03013645). Further, Márton Bene is a recipient of a Bolyai János Research Fellowship awarded by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (BO/334_20), and Xénia Farkas is a recipient of a ÚNKP Fellowship (ÚNKP-20-3-II-CORVINUS-10).
- 2 E.g.: www.facebook.com/298090296092/videos/641754303067234 or <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=625470641338034>.

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