

The black sheep of Europe: Orbán's Hungary as a political grey zone

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ABSTRACT

Since assuming power in Hungary in 2010, the Fidesz Party under Viktor Orbán has gradually but decisively moved towards more authoritarian rule. Though Hungary remains a member of the European Union and is far from a dictatorship, the growing power of the executive branch has raised concerns about the future of the country. In hopes of explaining this trend, this article argues that Orbán's Hungary is a dominant-power political grey zone.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis sa prise de pouvoir en Hongrie en 2010, le parti Fidesz, dirigé par Viktor Orbán, a progressivement évolué vers une dérive autoritaire claire. Bien que la Hongrie reste un pays membre de l'Union Européenne qui ne puisse être défini comme une dictature, le pouvoir de plus en plus important de l'exécutif a suscité des préoccupations réelles quant à l'avenir du pays. Dans l'optique de comprendre ces tendances, cet article analyse la Hongrie de Viktor Orbán comme une zone grise politique.



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Introduction

Brash, bold, and cunning, Viktor Orbán is impossible to ignore. As the prime minister of Hungary and leader of the Fidesz Party¹, he has succeeded in putting the small central European country at the forefront of the political radar. In a now-infamous 2014 speech, he openly derided the institutions of 'Western' liberal democracy and proposed an alternative path modeled after the regimes of "Singapore, China, India Russia, and Turkey", which he dubbed "illiberal democracy" (Puddington, 2017, p. 35–36). Since then, his decisive steps towards authoritarianism, ardent nationalism, xenophobic and anti-refugee rhetoric, and open criticism of the European Union (EU) have made him the poster child of the European populist zeitgeist.

This paper seeks to shed light on these trends by arguing that Orbán's Hungary is a political grey zone, that is, a state that is "neither dictatorial nor clearly headed towards democracy" (Carothers, 2002, p. 9). Before delving into the analysis, the concept of political grey zones will be more thoroughly defined. Afterwards, evidence from recent events as well as a number of reports and indices will be used to justify the classification of Hungary as a political grey zone.

¹ The full name of the party is the Alliance of Young Democrats (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*).



Definition of political grey zone

Generally speaking, a grey zone is “an intermediate area between two opposing positions” or “a situation, subject, etc., not clearly or easily defined, or not covered by an existing category or set of rules” (Oxford English Dictionary Online, n.d.). Both of these definitions apply well to political grey zones, which were first introduced by Thomas Carothers in his 2002 article “The End of the Transition Paradigm”. In it, he critiques the democratic transition paradigm, the notion that “any country moving away from dictatorial rule can be considered a country in transition toward democracy”, an end goal it will inevitably reach (Carothers, 2002, p. 6). He argues that although some transitional states have either followed or completely rejected this model, the vast majority have done neither and find themselves somewhere in between. Supporters of the transition paradigm tend to label such states with “qualified democracy” terms, such as weak democracy, partial democracy, electoral democracy, and illiberal democracy; Carothers, on the other hand, classifies them as in the political grey zone. States in the grey zone have some elements of democracy: democratic constitutions, regular elections, and at least some degree of political space for opposition parties. However, they also possess serious democratic deficits, including frequent abuses of power and rule of law by political authorities, low levels of political participation by citizens (excluding voting), and elections of questionable legitimacy (Carothers, 2002, p. 9–10).

The political grey zone encompasses a wide variety of political situations and patterns. As a first step in refining this theory, Carothers identifies two broad, overarching ‘syndromes’: feckless pluralism and dominant-power politics. Countries that fall under the former category tend to exhibit considerable levels of political freedom, regular elections, and, perhaps most importantly, an alternation of power between truly unique political parties or groupings. Nevertheless, democratic institutions are shaky. Instead of encouraging more effective governance, the alternation of power often leads political parties to simply pass around the country’s problems. The state is weak, frequently resulting in limited and ineffective social and political reforms, poorly designed and executed economic policy, and ultimately worsened economic performance. Political elites are largely perceived to be corrupt and dishonest, prioritizing their own interests over those of the country. As a result, citizens are largely disillusioned by political life and participate little aside from voting (Carothers, 2002, p. 10–11).

States that fit the syndrome of dominant-power politics also have some elements of democracy, namely a “limited but still real political space, some political contestation by opposition groups, and at least most institutional forms of



democracy"; however, one party or political group "dominates the system in such a way that there appears to be little prospect of alternation of power in the foreseeable future" (Carothers, 2002, p. 11–12). As a result, the line between the dominant party and the state blurs: State institutions and authorities, including public media, the central bank, the police, and even the judiciary, often essentially serve the ruling party. Top political positions are frequently granted to close associates of the ruling party. Corruption is rampant, as are abuses of state power. Although opposition parties exist and are usually allowed to compete in elections, they have little chance of gaining significant political power. Often, this is due to their relative weakness in comparison to the dominant party; however, in some countries, unfair elections also play a key role. Citizens, like those in countries with feckless pluralism, are disaffected by politics and have low levels of political participation beyond voting. That said, the public does sometimes unite to pressure the government into making some reforms, often with regards to large-scale corruption and abuses of power. Though the ruling party may promise to tackle these problems, it often only does so on paper in order to maintain its grip on power (Carothers, 2002, p. 11–13). Within this framework, Hungary is best classified as an example of dominant-power politics.²

² It is important to note that considerable variation, namely with regards to the political direction of the state and its degree of freedom, exists within these two syndromes. The characteristics outlined above are the most prevalent trends.



Hungary as a political grey zone

The dominant power in Hungary is Orbán and by extension his party Fidesz. Since reassuming power in 2010³, he has taken significant steps to secure the party's rule. Perhaps the best examples of these tactics are the 2012 constitutional reform and the subsequent four amendments to it. After attaining a parliamentary supermajority (i.e., over two-thirds of the seats) in the 2010 elections, Fidesz and its sister party, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP⁴) gained the ability to amend the Constitution, a power that it quickly exploited. It is important to note that they drafted and enacted these changes without any input, support, or even involvement from any opposition party. The new constitution decreased the size of the parliament by half, changed the electoral system to a mixed-member electoral system,⁵ and modified how votes were aggregated (Scheppele, 2014b). It also altered how election commissioners – officials tasked with supervising elections – are appointed, effectively ensuring that they will all be members of the ruling party (Brodsky, 2014).

Outside of the new constitution, Fidesz has implemented other means to influence elections. In 2011, the government offered dual citizenship and thus the right to vote to ethnic Hungarians in bordering states, the vast majority of whom are Fidesz supporters, while simultaneously making it more difficult for Hungarian expatriates, who generally lean left, to cast ballots. Furthermore, it redrew the borders of all individual electoral districts, which some analysts argue unfairly favor Fidesz (Mudde, 2014; Scheppele, 2014a, 2014b). During the 2014 parliamentary election and the lead-up that of 2018, Fidesz also implemented unfair campaigning practices. According to election monitors, the 2014 campaign was marked by a lack of "separation between party and state" (Scheppele, 2014b). For instance, it circumvented restrictions on campaign financing by having government-allied NGOs run massive advertising campaigns. Moreover, municipalities governed by Fidesz supported the campaign by running pro-Fidesz advertisements on municipally funded television channels. Although these means were legal, they

³ Orbán was the prime minister of Hungary from 1998-2002. The Socialist Party then took power in 2002, but the 2008 financial crisis as well as scandals contributed to Fidesz winning a supermajority in 2010 (Traub, 2015).

⁴ The full name of KDNP is *Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*. The party is separate from Fidesz only in name; in fact, many polling companies and political analysts consider it to be a part of Fidesz (Mudde, 2014).

⁵ In a mixed-member electoral system, a portion of parliamentary seats is elected as single-member districts by first-past-the-post system. The remaining portion is elected proportionally by party lists (Mudde, 2014).



provided Fidesz with an unfair advantage over opposition parties (Scheppele, 2014b).

Interestingly, Hungary performed rather well in the 2018 World Electoral Freedom Index, ranking higher than a number of liberal democracies, such as the Netherlands and Germany (Peña, 2017, p. 47). It is also received a strikingly high score for the category of "electoral process and pluralism" – 9,17 out of 10 – in the 2017 Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017, p. 8). In fact, Hungary ranked second in the world in active suffrage, a measure that takes into account the universality of the right to suffrage and its restrictions, the fairness of voter registration, and the management of voting and ballot counting procedures (Peña, 2017, p. 31). In addition, a genuine opposition, however weak and fragmented, does indeed exist, distinguishing Hungary from other dominant-power systems (Puddington, 2017, p. 37). These figures indicate that although elections are biased towards Fidesz and therefore not completely fair, they are objectively legitimate.

Fidesz has also moved to control the media. Since 2010, Hungary has consistently ranked lower on Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index and Freedom House's World Press Freedom Report. The first concrete step of this decline was the introduction of the controversial 2011 media law. It required all media outlets to register with the state and set standards for their content, specifically calling for them to provide "balanced" coverage that is relevant to the Hungarian people and that "respect[s] human dignity" (Dunai, 2014). Though these requirements sound fair and valuable for democracy, the establishment of the Media Council, a watchdog committee appointed entirely by the ruling party, reveals that they are actually an avenue for government influence (Dunai, 2014). Since then, the government has applied pressure on independent media outlets, especially those critical of the government, gradually pushing them out of the market. Media ownership has simultaneously shifted towards Orbán's allies, leading Reporters Without Borders to dub Orbán a "press baron" (2017). One particularly concerning example of this occurred at the end of 2016, with the suspension of the left-liberal *Nepszabadsag*, the most influential daily newspaper in the country. Shortly afterwards, its parent publishing company – which then owned over 50% of daily regional newspapers – was sold to a business owned by a close adviser of Orbán (Freedom House, 2017b, p. 6; Reporters sans Frontieres, 2017).

Cronyism not only plagues the media but also the economy and state institutions. Orbán has transformed Hungary into a "crony capitalist state *par excellence*", making business success reliant on the strength of political connections (Puddington, 2017, p. 36). Under the guise of promoting national industry, Orbán



has introduced taxes that hurt foreign-owned corporations and favor ones controlled by allies, given supporters and close friends control over nationalized sectors, and awarded lucrative state contracts to government-friendly businesses. These methods have created a circle of extremely wealthy, loyalist oligarchs. They further entrench the power of Fidesz, for they can finance electoral campaigns, buy out companies critical of the government, and provide incentives for party supporters (Buckley & Byrne, 2017; Freedom House, 2017a, p. 8; Puddington, 2017, p. 36).

Corruption and cronyism also pervade state institutions. For example, the head of the National Bank is a close Orbán ally (Freedom House, 2017c). The judiciary similarly lacks independence, as all members of the Constitutional Court have been appointed by Fidesz and overwhelmingly rule in the party's favor (Vásquez & Porčnik, 2016, p. 91). According to the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, Hungary is the second most corrupt state in the EU and the most corrupt of high-income countries (World Justice Project, 2016, p. 94). This corruption has likely contributed to the weak democratic political culture. On average, citizens show little to moderate interest in following politics and are cynical towards the functioning of the state (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017, p. 38). Civic participation is the lowest in the EU, at levels similar to Russia and Afghanistan (World Justice Project, 2016, p. 94). Public support for democracy is low, but that for Fidesz is high, which Orbán will likely interpret as a mandate to continue down his illiberal path (Freedom House, 2017c).



Conclusion

Due to electoral manipulation, media suppression, widespread corruption and cronyism, and low levels of civic participation, Hungary can be classified as a dominant-power political grey zone. Orbán is successfully chipping away at democratic institutions in order to centralize power in the executive and solidify his party's control of the government. Fidesz is poised to win the 2018 parliamentary elections, indicating that this trend is likely to continue. This bodes poorly for the country's development, as civil liberties and democratic freedoms, especially for minority groups, will likely be slowly curtailed in order to secure power. Orbán is still far from becoming a true dictator; however, if he remains unchecked, he may soon join the ranks of Putin or Erdoğan.



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