



CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN REVIEW

Volume 13, 2019

ประชาธิปไตยสู่เผด็จการอำนาจนิยมภายใต้ผู้นำประชานิยมในฮังการีและโปแลนด์

**DEMOCRACY TOWARDS AUTHORITARIANISM UNDER ILLIBERAL POPULIST
LEADERS IN HUNGARY AND POLAND**

by

อรรรวรา วัฒนวิศาล (Onvara Vadhanavisala)

Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Abstract

A quarter of a century ago, the Soviet Union dissolved and the Cold War ended. Now the current political era involves a broad challenge to liberal democracy in the European Union. Central European countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Republic of Poland, and the Slovak Republic ('the Visegrád Group') joined the EU in 2004 with the hope that the post-Cold War era would be one of peace and stability in Europe, including (most importantly) the expansion of Europe's democracy. A turning point came in 2014, however, when the Syrian refugee crisis hit the EU and caused a political 'about face'. The European refugee and migrant crisis have strengthened right-wing populism among the European countries, including the Visegrád group. Obviously there are certainly similarities between the populist rhetoric of Hungary's ruling party, *Fidesz*, and the Law and Justice party (known as *PiS*) which is governing the Republic of Poland. The two countries appear to be following the same path of becoming 'illiberal democratic' states. The templates of authoritarianism which both countries have adopted involve the following: the restriction of civil society and the independence of the media, control of the judiciary and the court system, together with the transformation of the constitutional framework and electoral law in order to consolidate power. This paper analyses two examples of authoritarian populist leaders: first, Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary of the *Fidesz* Party and, second, Jarosław Kaczyński, a leader of the Law and Justice Party (*PiS*) in Poland. A brief description of each is provided as a background for the discussion which follows.

Keywords: Democracy, Authoritarianism, Autocracy, Populism, Hungary, Poland, Visegrád Four, Central Europe, European Union, Viktor Orbán, Pluralism, Civil Society, Eurosceptic, Illiberal Democracy, Right-wing Party, *Fidesz*, Law and Justice Party, Jarosław Kaczyński

ISSN 1752-7503

10.2478/caeer-2020-0002

© 2019 CEER First publication

Central and Eastern European Review

ประชาธิปไตยสู่เผด็จการอำนาจนิยมภายใต้ผู้นำประชานิยมในฮังการีและโปแลนด์

Democracy towards Authoritarianism under Illiberal Populist Leaders in Hungary and Poland

by

อรุรธา วัฒนวิศาล (Onvara Vadhanavisala)

Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Editor's note

The following article is written by a new researcher who is just finishing her PhD at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. We thought that journal readers would be interested to engage with South East Asian views on recent developments in two of Central Europe's democracies.

Introduction

There has been a dramatic growth in anti-refugee discourse across Europe, especially in the Central European countries known as the Visegrád group or V4. The V4 has gained a reputation for adopting aggressive policies and actions towards refugees and international migrants. The difficult situation facing refugees and migrants became highly visible during 2014–15 as a result of the war in Syria. The war and political unrest in the Middle East have caused a million refugees to flee from their homeland in search of safety in Europe. All of Europe's governments have handled the situation differently. This paper focuses on how the Hungarian and Polish governments have responded to the refugee and migrant crisis. The tactics used by the populist leaders of the two countries provide one of the most obvious examples of how right-wing governments communicate with their people. Moreover, the paper will explore how the leaders use democratic tools to achieve their political goals, gain legitimacy, and remain in power continuously.

The populist leaders Viktor Orbán considers himself a defender of Christian values. His Hungarian *Fidesz* Party and the Polish Law and Justice Party share the belief that acceptance by voters and the will of a parliamentary majority can never be questioned—which is a mis-reading of democracy. Nonetheless, legitimacy is one of the most important factors in determining whether a political regime is democratic or

Central and Eastern European Review

authoritarian (Gerschewski, 2013). Every political system, if it is to ensure its persistence in the long term, must attain a certain level of legitimacy (Schmidt, 2003). Legitimacy is mandatory for every kind of political leader because it explains the actions and uses of power by a duly constituted government, including its means of rule and durability (Easton, 1965; Brady, 2009). Every government in the world, whether positioned on either the Left or Right of the political spectrum, needs support to stay in power. According to German sociologist Max Weber (1980), whose concept of legitimacy is followed in this paper, legitimation refers to the process of gaining support from the people. States or political systems in the modern era claim their right to frame government based on their 'righteous' legitimation (Gilley, 2009, p. 10). This involves a system's capacity to engender and maintain the belief of its people that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate for the society (Lipset, 1959, p. 86).

The striking example of 'who learns best' from this traditional Weberian philosophy is no other than Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian politician who has been Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010. He has also been President of the Hungary national conservative political party *Fidesz* since 1993. Orbán has become well-known for his negative attitude towards refugees and migrants, whom he has stigmatized as a threat to the nation the European Christian values. Poland has followed in Hungary's footsteps by developing a negative standpoint about, and by implementing negative policies towards, migrants and refugees. This has happened under the rule of the Law and Justice Party, which is a national-conservative, Christian democratic, right-wing populist political movement. Viktor Orbán of *Fidesz* and Jarosław Kaczyński of *PiS* share the same goals. Even though the latest *PiS* government has a new prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, the ruling party's illiberal policies will not change. Looking at the current political situation in both Hungary and Poland, the populist right-wing and conservative parties seem to appeal broadly to voters and play an important role in Hungarian and Polish society. This paper will explain how these two right-wing parties, especially as led by Viktor Orbán of Hungary, have put democratic tools to authoritarian, in the process appearing to consolidate the legitimate status of the government.

Hungary

A new kind of authoritarianism is taking root in Europe, especially in Hungary. In order to understand the anti-refugee/migrant campaign of the Hungarian government, we

Central and Eastern European Review

need to understand the political evolution of Viktor Orbán's party, *Fidesz*, and the particular characteristics of the Orbán governments after 2010. The *Fidesz* party was founded in 1988 (under the former communist government, 1949–89) and evolved eventually into an establishment conservative party. It has been playing an important role in Hungary's modern politics since 2010. Initially, *Fidesz* (Alliance of Young Democrats) was an anti-communist, liberal youth party with Western-friendly, environmentalist characteristics that did not admit members over the age of 35. In the early 1990s, the party underwent a rightward shift, turning from liberalism to conservative nationalism. Viktor Orbán was first elected to office for a four-year term in 1998. He was re-elected in 2014, and again, for his third consecutive term, in the latest Hungary national elections of April 2018. *Fidesz* has become the leading populist party in Hungary receiving more than 60% of the vote. While in power, the *Fidesz* government has passed over 800 laws that have restructured almost all of Hungary's public institutions. Orbán's government has destroyed numerous independent institutions in the country and has turned Hungary into a state against the rule of law. For example, Orbán and his party reshaped the electoral system, to ensure their hold on power would follow prospective elections. Viktor Orbán was elected for his third term as Hungary's prime minister by the most recent elections in 2018.¹

After Orbán came to power in 2010, his government started a direct campaign using marketing letters sent out to every Hungarian household in order 'to ask the opinion of the people' on certain issues. Viktor Orbán has mastered the art of using his position as a Prime Minister to create a useful political campaign for himself and his party. The Hungarian government's anti-refugee/migrant campaign started in January 2015, directly after the terrorist attack in Paris against the office of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. Scholars such as Marton (2017) have analyzed how the Hungarian government communicated with its people on the European refugee crisis during 2015–2016. Marton concluded that this kind of communication was nothing

¹ In 2019, after *Fidesz* has been holding a supermajority in parliament and had won seven consecutive landslides in national, municipal and European elections since 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was challenged by his political opposition, which was centre-left and pro-European. The *Fidesz*-backed incumbent as mayor of Budapest was ousted by 51% to 44%. A wide range of opposition parties from across the political spectrum united to back Gergely Karácsony, 44, over 71-year-old István Tarlós in the capital, with the same tactical success in another 10 of Hungary's 23 major cities. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/14/election-results-opposition-poland-hungary>

other than a campaign with a certain political purpose. In May 2015, Orbán sent out an official national consultation letter, both in paper and online formats, to every household in Hungary targeting citizen aged over 18—altogether eight million people.² The national consultation letter comprised two pages: first, a personal message signed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán; second, a national consultation survey on immigration and terrorism. A translation of the letter is shown in figures 1 and 2.³ *Please enlarge the page to read the text more easily.*

Figure 1: The first page of national consultation letter on immigrations and terrorism, a personal message from the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán.



Tisztelt Honfitársam!

Mi, magyarok 2010-ben úgy határoztunk, hogy minden fontos kérdést megbeszélünk egymással, mielőtt döntéseket hozunk. Ezért indítottunk nemzeti konzultációt többek között az ország új alaptörvényéről, mindannyiunk szociális biztonságáról, a nyugdíjasok helyzetének javításáról. És ezért indítunk most is nemzeti konzultációt a megélhetési bevándorlás kérdéséről.

Mint bizonyára emlékszik, Európát az év elején példátlan terrorcselekmény ráta meg. Párizsban ártatlan emberek életét oltották ki kegyetlen hidegvérrrel és ijesztő brutalitással. Mindannyiunkat megdöbbentette mindaz, ami történt. Ez az emberi észsel felfoghatatlan szörnyűség ugyanakkor azt is megmutatta, hogy Brüsszel és az Európai Unió nem képes megfelelő módon kezelni a bevándorlás kérdését.

A megélhetési bevándorlók törvénytelenül lépik át a határt, és miközben menekültnek állítják be magukat, valójában a szociális juttatásokért és a munkalehetőségért jönnek. Csak az elmúlt néhány hónapban mintegy húszszorosára nőtt a megélhetési bevándorlók száma Magyarországon. Ez egy új típusú fenyegetést jelent, amit meg kell állítanunk.

Mivel Brüsszel kudarcot vallott a bevándorlás kezelésében, Magyarországnak a saját útját kell járnia. Nem fogjuk hagyni, hogy a megélhetési bevándorlók veszélyeztessék a magyar emberek munkahelyeit és megélhetését.

Döntést kell hoznunk arról, hogyan kell védekeznie Magyarországnak a törvénytelen határátlépésekkel szemben. Döntenünk kell, hogyan korlátozzuk a robbanásszerűen növekvő megélhetési bevándorlót.

Tisztelettel arra kérem, lépjen velünk kapcsolatba, mondja el nekünk is, hogy mit gondol a foltett kérdéséről, töltsse ki, és küldje vissza a kérdőívet. Számítok a véleményére.

Üdvözléssel:



Orbán Viktor

Dear Hungarian Citizen,

In 2010 we Hungarians decided to discuss every important issue before decisions are taken. This is why we launched national consultations on issues which have included Hungary's new Fundamental Law, social security as a matter concerning us all, and the improvement of the situation of pensioners. And this is why we are now launching another national consultation, this time on the issue of economic immigration.

I am sure you will remember that at the beginning of the year Europe was shaken by an unprecedented act of terror. In Paris the lives of innocent people were extinguished, in cold blood and with terrifying brutality. We were all shocked by what happened. At the same time, this incomprehensible act of horror also demonstrated that Brussels and the European Union are unable to adequately deal with the issue of immigration.

Economic migrants cross our borders illegally, and while they present themselves as asylum-seekers, in fact they are coming to enjoy our welfare systems and the employment opportunities our countries have to offer. In the last few months alone, in Hungary the number of economic migrants has increased approximately twentyfold. This represents a new type of threat – a threat which we must stop in its tracks.

As Brussels has failed to address immigration appropriately, Hungary must follow its own path. We shall not allow economic migrants to jeopardise the jobs and livelihoods of Hungarians.

We must make a decision on how Hungary should defend itself against illegal immigrants. We must make a decision on how to limit rapidly rising economic immigration.

Please contact us and give us your response to the questions we are asking. Please complete and return the questionnaire. I am counting on your opinion.

With regards,

Viktor Orbán

Source: Europa.eu

² 'Hungary: Government's National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism Creates Widespread Debate.' *Together Against Trafficking in Human Beings*, 6 Jan. 2015, ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/hungary-governments-national-consultation-on-immigration-and-terrorism-creates-widespread-debate.

³ An English translation of the first page of a personal message from the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary. Accessed via an official website of the Hungarian government: <http://www.kormany.hu/en>

Figure 2: The second page of the national consultation letter issued by the Hungarian government, a questionnaire.

NEMZETI KONZULTÁCIÓ

a bevándorlásról és a terrorizmusról

Kérjük, töltsé ki a kérdőívet!

1] Sokféle véleményt lehet hallani az erősödő terrorizmus-kezeléssel kapcsolatban. Ön mennyire tartja fontos kérdésnek a terrorizmus térnyerését (a franciaországi vérengzést, az ISIS riasztó cselekményeit) a saját élete szempontjából?
 Nagyon fontos Fontos Nem fontos

2] Ön szerint az elkövetkező években lehet-e terrorcselekmény célpontja Magyarország?
 Komoly esély van rá Előfordulhat Teljesen kizárt

3] Vannak, akik szerint a Brüsszel által rosszul kezelt bevándorlás összefüggésben van a terrorizmus térnyerésével. Ön egyetért ezekkel a véleményekkel?
 Teljesen egyetértök Inkább egyetértök Nem értek egyet

4] Tudta-e Ön, hogy a megélhetési bevándorlók törvénytelenné lépik át a magyar határt, és az elmúlt időszakban házasosra vált a bevándorlók száma Magyarországon?
 Igen Hallottam róla Nem tudtam

5] Sokféle véleményt hallani a bevándorlás kérdésével kapcsolatban. Vannak, akik szerint a megélhetési bevándorlók veszélyeztetik a magyar emberek munkahelyeit és megélhetését. Ön egyetért ezekkel a véleményekkel?
 Teljesen egyetértök Inkább egyetértök Nem értek egyet

6] Vannak, akik szerint Brüsszel politikája a bevándorlás és a terrorizmus kérdésében megbukott, és ezért új megközelítésre van szükség ezekben a kérdésekben. Ön egyetért ezekkel a véleményekkel?
 Teljesen egyetértök Inkább egyetértök Nem értek egyet

7] Támogatná-e Ön a magyar kormányt, hogy Brüsszel megengedő politikájával szemben szigorúbb bevándorlási szabályozást vezessen be?
 Igen, teljes mértékben támogatnám Részben támogatnám Nem támogatnám

8] Támogatná-e Ön a magyar kormányt, hogy szigorúbb szabályokat vezessen be, ami alapján őrizetbe vehetők a magyar határt törvénytelenül átlépő bevándorlók?
 Igen, teljes mértékben támogatnám Részben támogatnám Nem támogatnám

9] Egyetért-e Ön azaz a véleménnyel, hogy a magyar határt törvénytelenül átlépő bevándorlók a lehető legrövidebb időn belül vissza kell fordítani a saját hazájukba?
 Teljesen egyetértök Inkább egyetértök Nem értek egyet

10] Egyetért-e Ön azaz, hogy a megélhetési bevándorlók, amíg Magyarországon tartózkodnak, saját maguk biztosítsák az ellátási költségeiket?
 Teljesen egyetértök Inkább egyetértök Nem értek egyet

11] Egyetért-e Ön azaz, hogy a bevándorlás elleni küzdelem legjobban elegendő, ha az Európai Unió tagországai segítik azon országok fejlesztését, ahonnan a bevándorlók érkeznek?
 Teljesen egyetértök Inkább egyetértök Nem értek egyet

12] Egyetért-e Ön a magyar kormányval abban, hogy a bevándorlás helyett inkább a magyar családok és a születendő gyermekek támogatására van szükség?
 Teljesen egyetértök Inkább egyetértök Nem értek egyet

A KÉRDŐÍV VISSZAKÜLDÉSE INGYENES.
HATÁRIDŐ: 2015. JÚLIUS 1.

Adatvédelmi tájékoztató: Az Ön név- és lakcímadatát a Kormányzati és Elektronikus Közvetlétársulások Központi Hivatala (1095 Budapest, Balázs Béla utca 35., a továbbiakban: KÉKOH) által vezetett személyzeti- és lakcímadatnyilvántartásba a Minisztériumok (1055 Budapest, Kosuth tér 1-3.) a polgári személyi adatának és lakcíkjának nyilvántartásáról szóló 1992. évi LXVI. Törvény 10/A. §-a alapján, szerényre szóló tájékoztatás, véleményezés céljából igyekszik. A Minisztériumok a kérésre megismerhetik az adatfeldolgozást a KÉKOH-tól, aközvetlenül a Magyar Posta Zrt-től is. Személyes adatait a Minisztériumok az adatok átvételétől számított 60 napon belül törlik. Személyes adatainak törlését a KÉKOH-nál, valamint bármely Hivatal és megengedő kormányzati parancs útjánai keretében hozzájárulással kezdeményezheti. Az adatkezelést a Nemzeti Adatvédelmi és Információszabadság Hatóság nyilvántartotta vette.

Feladó: Miniszterelnökség

NATIONAL CONSULTATION on immigration and terrorism

Published by the Prime Minister's Office

Please complete this questionnaire.

1] We hear different views on increasing levels of terrorism. How relevant do you think the spread of terrorism (the bloodshed in France, the shocking acts of ISIS) is to your own life?

Very relevant Relevant Not relevant

2] Do you think that Hungary could be the target of an act of terror in the next few years?

There is a very real chance It could occur Out of the question

3] There are some who think that mismanagement of the immigration question by Brussels may have something to do with increased terrorism. Do you agree with this view?

I fully agree I tend to agree I do not agree

4] Did you know that economic migrants cross the Hungarian border illegally, and that recently the number of immigrants in Hungary has increased twentyfold?

Yes I have heard about it I did not know

5] We hear different views on the issue of immigration. There are some who think that economic migrants jeopardise the jobs and livelihoods of Hungarians. Do you agree?

I fully agree I tend to agree I do not agree

6] There are some who believe that Brussels' policy on immigration and terrorism has failed, and that we therefore need a new approach to these questions. Do you agree?

I fully agree I tend to agree I do not agree

7] Would you support the Hungarian Government in the introduction of more stringent immigration regulations, in contrast to Brussels' lenient policy?

Yes, I would fully support the Government
I would partially support the Government
I would not support the Government

8] Would you support the Hungarian government in the introduction of more stringent regulations, according to which migrants illegally crossing the Hungarian border could be taken into custody?

Yes, I would fully support the Government
I would partially support the Government
I would not support the Government

9] Do you agree with the view that migrants illegally crossing the Hungarian border should be returned to their own countries within the shortest possible time?

I fully agree I tend to agree I do not agree

10] Do you agree with the concept that economic migrants themselves should cover the costs associated with their time in Hungary?

I fully agree I tend to agree I do not agree

11] Do you agree that the best means of combating immigration is for Member States of the European Union to assist in the development of the countries from which migrants arrive?

I fully agree I tend to agree I do not agree

12] Do you agree with the Hungarian government that support should be focused more on Hungarian families and the children they can have, rather than on immigration?

I fully agree I tend to agree I do not agree

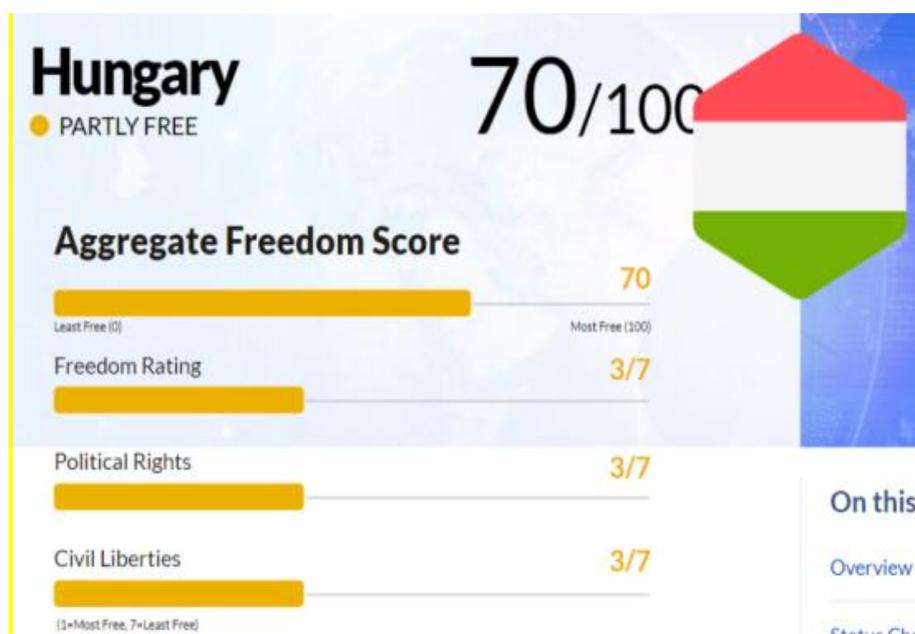
Source: Europa.eu

Central and Eastern European Review

Generally, a national consultation aims to collect feedback about a certain topic, to weigh the opinion of the public and to conclude what should be done. In this case, the aim was to gather an accurate representation of the public's opinion about how the government should set up its immigration policy. This national consultation survey on behalf of the government of Hungary, however, was more likely to have been an agenda-setting exercise rather than a normal 'public hearing'. After reading this translated 'consultation', it is clear that the campaign made use of democratic tools to promote xenophobic propaganda because the questions were manipulative. The questions gave only three possible answers (I fully agree, I tend to agree and I do not agree), two of which were geared to the expected answer (to agree or disagree). The questions allowed no space for discussion and narrowed down the alternatives for the respondents. This national consultation represented a mechanism by which the government attempted to legitimise its racist and xenophobic policies towards refugees and migrants. In addition, it was an opportunity for the government and *Fidesz* to collect a database of potential voters on the basis of regional response rates. A prediction of voting behavior would be possible because people who supported *Fidesz* were likely to return the letters while the opposition would choose to ignore it.

The national consultation purported to ask the opinion of the people, but the results were not made public and the questions were rather rhetorical and sometimes filled with fear-mongering linked to Muslims and the scapegoating of refugees and migrants. What's more, the national consultation was supported by a countrywide billboard campaign. Nor was this the only national consultation. The 2018 campaign against George Soros and his alleged 'Soros plan' was the seventh initiative of this kind by the Orbán government since 2010. Moreover, Victor Orbán seized control of his country's media through a series of legal and administrative reforms within weeks of *Fidesz* taking power. Hungary has faced criticism from European and international advocates of press freedom, but is continuing along its path anyway. The country has been rated only 'partly free' by Freedom House, an organization which has observed global political rights and civil liberties for 13 consecutive years (2005 to 2018). This reflects a status decline in 2019 (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Freedom House, Hungary 2019



Source: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedomworld/2019/hungary>

[Editor's note. A still more recent report by Freedom House judges Hungary to be 'free' in general, but the country's press is judged only 'partly free'. See <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary> (Consulted 2 December 2019)]

Orbán's government uses the techniques of creating fear of external enemies and of blaming migrants at the right time. It applies a set of ideas connecting refugees and migrants with security and terrorism issues and presents them as a cultural threat. Sík *et al.* (2016) summarize the main messages of the Hungarian government's anti-refugee/migrant campaign as follows: first, refugees (in this case especially Syrian refugees) and terrorism are inseparable; second, the inflow of refugees and migrants results in natives losing their jobs; finally, refugees and migrants are the reason for an increase in crime rates. A never ending supply of right-wing propaganda is disseminated by the official state and private media empires of Orbán's allies.

Central and Eastern European Review

Mainstream media communications lead to the creation of negative perceptions of especially Muslim refugees and migrants, who are portrayed as an existential threat to Hungarian society, European culture and Christian value. By contrast, the media have touted Orbán's 'illiberal democratic' regime as the only option for protecting Hungary from an Islamic invasion. This European refugee and migrant crisis serves as a tool to legitimize the authoritarianism of Viktor Orbán and *Fidesz*, paving the way for the government to pass laws undermining its opponents.

Another important tool that Viktor Orbán uses to undermine political opponents is intervention in the courts. *Fidesz* expanded its power and packed the court with its allies, restricted its jurisdiction, and changed the rules by which the court reviews laws for constitutional compliance. The government has lowered the retirement age for judges which resulted in over 200 judges having to retire in 2011. It also created a new National Judicial Office with new qualification requirements. As a result, the country's judiciary has come under the control of the Hungarian government, not to mention that all of the processes were done in less than a year to pass these legal changes and to adopt a new constitution.

In conclusion, the Hungarian government has produced a series of 'hate campaigns' to set the political agenda. It appears that Viktor Orbán and his right-wing government rules the country legitimately. For example, elections are arranged and the government seems to 'listen' to public voices through many national consultations. Orbán has, however, shifted Hungary towards a soft fascism regime with a political system that aims to seize control of every major aspect of a country's political institutions. It also aims to control social life and the media which are funded and supported by *Fidesz* and Orbán's empire. This new regime of soft fascism no longer needs to resort to traditional 'hard' measures such as banning elections or building up a police state. People are overwhelmed by perceptions and feelings that refugees are related to terrorism and that the problem affects their lives. This is how the right-wing government distracts its people from hard policy issues such as poverty, the education system, energy policy, economic productivity or a health care system which directly affects Hungarian people and kills thousands of them. By focusing on refugees and migrants, Orbán's right-wing government succeeds in distracting the public's attention from the government's failures over social issues.

Central and Eastern European Review

Poland

The rise of right-wing authoritarian governments has tended to be viewed as a phenomenon of Central Europe. The most dangerous possibility for Hungarian soft fascism and illiberal democracy is that this kind of model could be exported to any democratic country whose leaders have had enough of political opposition. While the Orbán regime grew out of Hungary's unique history and political culture, Poland is following Hungary's path of becoming an illiberal state by reform of the judiciary. The Poland's Law and Justice Party (*PiS*) won the 2015 election,⁴ which marked another starting point for the rise of contemporary authoritarian populism in Central Europe. *PiS*'s policies have led to intensifying radical right-wing, xenophobia, and nationalism. They have also created polarization in Polish society and social protest movements unseen in Poland since 1989. Furthermore, *PiS* gained an absolute majority in parliament and was able to dis-assemble the state's established democratic checks and balances. As a result, Poland has moved away from liberal democratic ideals and towards authoritarian rule. Poland's *PiS* party is following Orbán's illiberal rule, or as Kaczyński reportedly said, 'the day will come when we will have Budapest in Warsaw.'⁵ *PiS* has removed the autonomy of the constitutional court and is turning the independent media into government propaganda. In 2015, the party passed laws to limit the power and autonomy of the nation's highest court, the Constitutional Tribunal.

In 2015, at the peak of the migration crisis, the head of *PiS* and Poland's *de facto* leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, said that 'migrants have already brought diseases like cholera and dysentery to Europe, as well as all sorts of parasites and protozoa.'⁶ *PiS* claims that Muslim migrants could be a problem for Poland's homogenous society. Before the Second World War, Poland comprised of a Polish Roman Catholic population with large groups of Ukrainian, Belarusian, German, Jewish, Lithuanian and other minorities. However, after the War, with its consequences of ethnic cleansing and

⁴ *PiS* won the parliamentary election of 13 October 2019 with 44% of the vote. However, the ruling party lost control of the senate after opposition parties in most districts united around joint candidates (the same strategic collaboration of liberal democracy in Hungary) limiting its control of the legislature for the first time in four years and making it harder to push new laws. *PiS* will not be able to relish the free control it has had since 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/14/election-results-opposition-poland-hungary>

⁵ Neil Buckley and Henry Foy, 'Poland's new government finds a model in Orbán's Hungary,' *The Financial Times*, 6 January 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/0a3c7d44-b48e-11e5-8358-9a82b43f6b2f>.

⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/migrants-asylum-poland-kaczynski-election/>

Central and Eastern European Review

border alterations, Poland emerged as more ethnically unified than before, so laying some foundations for Polish nationalists.⁷

The Polish media which are connected to *PiS* also take anti-refugee/migrant positions. For example, a right-wing Polish magazine named *w Sieci (Online)* featured a headline ‘The Islamic Rape of Europe, with a cover image showing brown hands gripping a white woman dressed in an EU flag (see **Figure 4**). The magazine was widely described as Islamophobic and as echoing right-wing nationalist propaganda. We can see from this example that fears were spread by the media, with a frequent focus on sensationalism rather than rational and accurate analysis.

Figure 4: *w Sieci* featured headline ‘The Islamic Rape of Europe’



Source: https://www.cjr.org/analysis/poland_media.php

Discussion

During the 2000s, centre-left parties in Hungary and Poland were embroiled in a series of scandals and corruption cases. This made the Left unpopular among the people because they began to be seen as a corrupt élite government. Furthermore, the neoliberal policies that the Left applied in these two countries were not very successful. Consequently, the situation benefited the conservative Right, allowing them to come to

⁷ It should be noted that even after 1945, Poland still had some national minorities, such as the ethnic Germans of Upper Silesia; but there were fewer members of minority groups inside Poland than before 1939.

Central and Eastern European Review

power in Hungary and Poland after the Left was defeated in elections. The conservative right-wing parties were able to replace the Left because they represent themselves as the best defender of the people, challenging inequalities and injustices that the previous left government had either ignored or chosen to leave as part of the *status quo*. The conservative right-wing parties such as *Fidesz* succeeded in persuading voters that they would return power to the people and that they were fighting on behalf of the people against a corrupt élite. Regarding this élite, during his campaign against refugees and migrants, Viktor Orbán has shifted his emphasis from identifying the Left as a corrupt élite to the European Union. Orbán also speaks of taking back control from bureaucrats in Brussels, despite Hungary being a recipient of significant EU funds. In short, right-wing populist politicians such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński are appealing to people and gaining votes based on ostensible promises to provide what has been ignored for so long: a democratic voice for the people.

Nonetheless, once right-wing populist governments came into power in Hungary and Poland, they began to pull apart the checks and balances built into liberal democracy. For instance, intervention in the court and judicial system and reduction of the independent functioning of NGOs, The latter can be seen especially in the case of Hungary, where Viktor Orbán's policies and legal actions have targeted civic groups working with refugees and asylum-seekers. The aim is to silence the voice of the civic groups. Moreover, the government has undermined the freedom and independence of the media. At the same time, the right-wing populist government has adopted a nationalist ideology which is inimical towards refugees, migrants and even the LGBT community. Right-wing populists are anti-pluralist not only in their political philosophy but also in their political institutions which divide the world into 'real' and 'false' or 'us' and 'them'.

Prime Minister Orbán declared in 2014 that he would 'build an illiberal state on national foundations'⁸ and since then both Hungary and Poland have justified their agendas as necessary to protect the nation from refugees and immigrants. They have portrayed refugees as a group of people who bring terrorists into Europe and who would destroy European values through Muslim invasion. Despite low religiosity in Hungary, and the constitutional separation of church and state in Poland, the two governments have declared conservative Christian teaching to be the guiding principle

⁸ <https://euobserver.com/political/125128>

Central and Eastern European Review

behind state policy. They would also protect the nation from the legacies of the communist era, which *PiS* especially views as evil.

The governments of *Fidesz* and the Law and Justice Party have, in part, shared policies and rhetoric, at the same time shifting their political systems towards authoritarianism and nationalism, with the purpose of demolishing political opponents. There have been attempts to criminalize individuals associated with the former communist regime and to portray their critics as enemies. In Kaczynski's view, those who oppose *PiS* are 'Poles of the worst sort.' However, there are some important differences between these two governments. Due to Hungary's electoral system, *Fidesz* has had a constitutional majority in parliament, allowing it to push its reform programme further than its counterpart in Poland. In 2011, Hungary approved a new constitution in order to gain control of the Constitutional Court and introduced political reforms that have confirmed its grip on power. By contrast, the government in Poland has not altered the constitution: this has made the reform process in Poland much more difficult than in Hungary. Furthermore, initially the Polish government faced stronger disagreement both domestically and internationally.

Right-wing populists in Hungary and Poland have used the mechanism national representation (i.e. elections and parliamentary majorities) to misrepresent the true will of the people. Right-wing populists have reduced alternatives by polarizing politics into either agreement or disagreement. Institutions that were supposed to represent the general will of the people have been transformed in order to serve the interests of authoritarian rulers. Populists tend to choose simple and quick solutions. Hence, for instance, Hungary chose to spend heavily on building walls and fences on the border to protect the country from imagined threats rather than attempt to address underlying problem systematically and effectively. Although Hungary and Poland are considered to have had elections which returned freely elected executives, this does not mean that the regimes in question are truly democratic since those freely elected executives have been prepared to interfere in the state constitution, violate the rights of individuals and minorities, destroy the traditional functioning of the legislature, restrict media freedom and limit the activities of groups in civil society. Regimes that fail to govern within the bounds of the rule of law are not true democracies.

Conclusion

Ruth Wodak (2015) explained that right-wing political parties usually use a method of creating fear in the society in order to persuade people to vote for them. Somehow all politicians are populists in some way. They all address themselves to large numbers of people. They present themselves in a positive way and others in a negative way so that people will vote accordingly. It is usual for politicians to use populist rhetoric. Once in power, illiberal leaders and right-wing political parties employ democratic toolkits to their own advantage, with consistent efforts to weaken democratic institutions—particularly in respect of the judicial system, a pluralistic and fair political system, an independent media and an open civil society. The challenge is insidious since no single move appears to bring an existential threat to democracy. This is because illiberal politicians tend to use democratic tools such as constitutional referendums. Equally, they allow elections but weaken the press and consolidate the media landscape by purchasing communications platforms or by legislating censorship laws in the name of national security. Illiberal populist leaders demonize civil society groups including NGOs as foreign actors, for example Viktor Orbán’s attack on George Soros.

Both Hungary and Poland have been using democratic tools to pave the way for authoritarian rule and hence pose a threat to Europe as it is currently constituted. The present situation is at odds with the co-operation the two countries displayed as a sub-region of the Visegrád group when they left the influence of the Soviet Bloc and entered the European Union, developing their countries into democracies in the process. Today, however, both countries are implementing policies which take them away from democracy. It is important that individuals take a stand against right-wing radical nationalism; and this is happening. For example, in Poland, there is the ‘Never Again Association’ led by Rafał Pankowski which uses popular culture to engage Polish youth and raise awareness of Human Rights in the face of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. The association aims to create an anti-racist network in Poland through cultural events such as concerts and football games designed to attract younger generations. Hopefully initiatives comparable to ‘Never Again’ will emerge in other countries which are also facing the challenge of authoritarianism.⁹

⁹ The author attended an academic workshop led by Professor Rafał Pankowski, PhD (Institute of Sociology of Collegium Civitas in Warsaw). The event was held during 14-15 September 2019 in Bangkok by the MA and PhD in European Studies Programmes at Chulalongkorn University. The aims of the

workshop were to examine the roles and impact of individuals and civil society networks in challenging extremism and the populist radical right in Europe, and beyond.

Central and Eastern European Review

References

- Brady, A.M. (2009). 'Mass Persuasion as a Means of Legitimation and China's Popular Authoritarianism', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 53(3), 434–57.
- Danaj, A., Lazányi, K., & Bilan, S. (2018). Euroscepticism and populism in Hungary: The analysis of the prime minister's discourse. *Journal of International Studies*, 11(1), 240-247.
- Easton, D. (1965). *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. (New York, NY: Wiley).
- Esser, F., Stepinska, A., & Hopmann, D. N. (2016). 'Populism and the Media. Cross-National Findings and Perspectives.' In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck & C. d. Vreese (Eds.), *Populist Political Communication in Europe*. (London: Routledge, 365–80.)
- Gerschewski, J. (2013). 'The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes,' *Democratization*, 20:1, 13–38.
- Gidron N & Bonikowski B. (2013). 'Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda.' *Weatherhead Working Paper Series*, 13(4) 1–38.
- Gilley, B. (2009). *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press).
- Haraszti, M. (2015). 'Behind Viktor Orbán's War on Refugees in Hungary.' *News Perspective Quarterly*, 32(4), 37–40.
- Hiers, W., Soehl, T., Wimmer, A. (2017). 'National Trauma and the Fear of Foreigners: How Past Geopolitical Threat Heightens Anti-Immigration Sentiment Today.' *Social Forces*, 96(1), 361–88.
- Ignatieff, M. (2017). 'The Refugee as Invasive Other.' *Social Research*, 84(1), 223–31.
- Kareem, I. (2017). Viktor Orbán's use of history in the European refugee crisis. (Master Thesis). Lund University, Lund, Sweden.
- Krekó, P., & Juhász, A. (2018). *The Hungarian Far Right Social Demand, Political Supply, and International Context (Explorations of the Far Right)*. (London: ibidem Press.)
- Lipset, S. M. (1959). 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Development.' *American Political Science Review*, 53(1), 69–105.
- Marton, Z. (2017). Populism and the Refugee Crisis: The Communication of the Hungarian Government on the European Refugee Crisis in 2015–2016. (Master Thesis). Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden.

Central and Eastern European Review

- Moreno, L. (2010). 'Fearing the Future: Islamophobia in Central Europe.' *Genocide and Oppression*, 73–80.
- Mudde, C. (2004). 'The Populist Zeitgeist.' *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 542–63.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)
- Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. (2012). 'Populism: Corrective and threat to democracy.' In C. Mudde & C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or corrective for democracy?* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, pp. 205–22)
- Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C., R. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press.)
- Freedomhouse. (2019). *Democracy in Retreat*. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019>
- Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. (London: Verso.)
- Lendvai, P. & Major, A. (2003). 'The Hungarians: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat.' (Princeton. *New Jersey: Princeton University Press*, 99–101.)
- Levitsky, S. & Loxton J. (2012). Populism and competitive authoritarianism: the case of Fujimori's Peru. In: Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.). *Populism in Europe and the Americas*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)
- Otero, G., & Gürcan, E. (2016). *The Arab Spring and the Syrian refugee crisis* (Vol. 22).
- Panizza, F. (2005). *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. (London: Verso.)
- Pankowski, R. (2010.) *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The Patriots*. (London: Routledge.)
- Pankowski, R. (2003). *Breaking the Silence Using Popular Culture to Engage Young People in Human Rights Reporting*. (Minneapolis.)
- Pappas, T. (2016). 'Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition.' *Politics: Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, 1-24.
- Pędziwiatr, K. (2017). 'Islamophobia in Poland: National Report 2016' in: Enes Bayraklı & Farid Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report 2016*, Istanbul, SETA, 2017 (411–42).

Central and Eastern European Review

- Postelnicescu, C. (2016). 'Europe's New Identity: The Refugee Crisis and the Rise of Nationalism.' *Eur J Psychol*, 12(2), 203–09.
- Schmidt, S. (2003). 'Theoretische Überlegungen zum Konzept "Politische Stabilität"', in Faath, S. (ed.) *Stabilitätsprobleme zentraler Staaten: Ägypten, Algerien, Saudi Arabien, Iran, Pakistan und die regionalen Auswirkungen* (Hamburg: Deutsches OrientInstitut, 9–39.)
- Sereghy, Z. (2017). 'Islamophobia in Hungary: National Report 2016,' in: Enes Bayraklı & Farid Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report 2016*, Istanbul, SETA, 2017 (255–72), 258.
- Spruyt, B., Keppens, G., & Droogenbroeck, F. V. (2016). 'Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?' *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(2), 335–46
- Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. (Birmingham: Open University Press.)
- Wodak, R. (2015). 'The Politics of Fear. What Right-Wing Populist Discourse Means.' *Concept*, 9(1).
- Zunes, S. (2017). 'Europe's Refugee Crisis, Terrorism, and Islamophobia.' *Peace Review*, 29(1), 1–7.

About the author

Onvara Vadhanavisala is a PhD student on the European Studies Program at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. Her thesis topic is 'The Visegrad Group and the European Migrant and Refugee Crisis: Factors and the Case of Hungary'. Contact her at onvarav@gmail.com.