



AUTHORITARIAN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

**CASES OF CHINA, IRAN, RUSSIA,
BELARUS AND HUNGARY**

Edited by Vladislav Inozemtsev

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Viktor Orbán in Russian-Hungarian talks. Photo: kremlin.ru

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Two months after the first pair of cases were confirmed¹ on March 4, the total number of people officially diagnosed with COVID-19 in Hungary reached 3,035 with 351 deaths.² The same two months saw the Hungarian autocracy strengthening its position by accelerating the concentration of power in the political and economic spheres and paralyzing opposition. While this result is in line with the general aims of Viktor Orbán's regime,³ reaching it did not happen because of a "masterplan" but rather a more evolutionary process. This required changing the course of action Orbán had planned for the year, as well as him accepting the gravity of the situation from the beginning.

1 The first unconfirmed case is a Hungarian man who was later said to infect his father, the first Hungarian confirmed case. The son was examined on 27 February but released from the hospital. It is unclear whether he was tested for COVID. Bozzay Balázs, "Megvizsgálták, de elengedték az első magyar koronavírussal fertőzött fiát. Most azt mondják, ő fertőzhetette meg az apját [They Tested and Released the Son of the First Hungarian Infected with COVID. Now They Say He Might Have Infected His Father]," March 8, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/08/kinai_koronavirus_magyarorszag_karanten_vizsgalat_teszt/.

2 As of 4 May. For up-to-date information, see "About Hungary - CORONAVIRUS: Here's the Latest," accessed May 4, 2020, <http://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/coronavirus-heres-the-latest/>.

3 On the Hungarian autocracy, see Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016); Peter Krasztev and Jon Van Til, eds., *The Hungarian Patient: Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy* (Budapest; New York: CEU Press, 2015).

FROM SUB-ISSUE TO CENTRAL ISSUE

For the Hungarian regime, the period between late January and late March can be described as a transition from COVID-19 being a sub-issue to it being a central issue. This may not be obvious if we look only at the official measures. Formal preparations for the pandemic were initiated by the government more than a month before the first confirmed cases. The Operational Group (*Operatív Törzs* in Hungarian) tasked with coordinating defense against the epidemic was set up on January 31 by decree, and it published an action plan the next day.⁴ Also on February 1, a person arriving from Wuhan, the center of the pandemic in China, was quarantined at Budapest Airport, although he later tested negative for COVID-19.⁵ On the other hand, Orbán did not believe there would be a serious epidemic in Europe. On February 12, he announced a so-called national consultation, involving the population via mailed surveys on topics

4 "The Operational Group's Action Plan for Protection against the Coronavirus Epidemic," Hungarian Government, February 1, 2020, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-interior/news/the-operational-group-s-action-plan-for-protection-against-the-coronavirus-epidemic>.

5 "Nem fertőzött koronavírussal a Wuhanban járt, Ferihegyen elkülönített férfi [The Man from Wuhan, Quarantined in Ferihegy, is Not Infected with COVID]," Index.hu, February 1, 2020, https://index.hu/techtud/2020/02/01/egy_wuhanban_jart_lazas_beteget_kulonitettek_el_a_liszt_ferenc_repuloteren/.

he and his party, Fidesz, had recently made central: the “unearned” compensation of Roma children for inferior education, and the “jail business” of prison inmates receiving redress for having been incarcerated in inhumane conditions.⁶ As for COVID-19, it was treated as a sub-issue in the government’s anti-migration narrative, which had dominated governmental communication since 2015. When Orbán first mentioned the virus in a public interview he said that “now the coronavirus gathers all attention, but the historic challenge is still migration,”⁷ and later he stated that “illegal migration and the COVID epidemic are clearly correlated.”⁸ The first two confirmed cases of COVID-19—two Iranian students—were used as proof for this correlation, and they were depicted as disorderly and noncooperative in governmental media.⁹

Transition from COVID-19 being a sub-issue began when Orbán realized (1) the people did not connect the epidemic to migration but saw it as a new, and more burning problem, and (2) his own party members and MPs began treating the epidemic as a central issue. Based on the investigative article of Pál Dániel Rényi,¹⁰ three signs of the latter could be noticed. First, Orbán was pressured by MPs whose constituents bombarded them with questions like “from where they will buy hand sanitizer, who will help with shopping, when will there be a curfew, how will we survive this.” Second, genuine fear appeared among members of the governing coalition as well, particularly older MPs of the smaller governing party, KDNP (Christian Democratic People’s Party) who started wearing masks during parliamentary sessions.

6 “Orbán Bejelentett Egy Újabb Nemzeti Konzultációt [Orbán Announced a New National Consultation],” 444.hu, February 12, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/02/12/orban-bejelentett-egy-ujabb-nemzeti-konzultaciot>.

7 “Orbán: Bár a Koronavírus Minden Figyelmet Magához Vonz, a Történelmi Kihívás Továbbra Is a Migráció [Orbán: While COVID Gathers All Attention, the Historic Challenge Is Still Migration],” 444.hu, February 28, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/02/28/orban-bar-a-koronavirus-minden-figyelmet-magahoz-vonz-a-tortenelmi-kihivas-tovabbra-is-a-migracio>.

8 “Orbán: Az illegális migráció és a koronavírus-járvány között egyértelműen kapcsolat van [Orbán: Illegal Migration and the COVID Epidemic are Clearly Correlated],” 24.hu, March 10, 2020, <https://24.hu/kulfold/2020/03/10/koronavirus-orban-viktor/>.

9 Tamás Botos, “A Propaganda Ott Tart, Mintha a Koronavírus Nálunk Csak a Rendetlenkedő Iráni Diákok Miatt Lenne Probléma [According to the Propaganda, COVID Is a Problem Only Because of the Disorderly Iranian Students],” 444, March 10, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/03/10/a-propaganda-ott-tart-mintha-a-koronavirus-nalunk-csak-a-rendetlenkedo-irani-diakok-miatt-lenne-problema>.

10 Pál Dániel Rényi, “Saját Emberei Ébresztették Rá Orbánt, Hogy a Vírus Itt van a Nyakunkon [His Own People Forced Orbán to Realize That the Epidemic Was Imminent],” 444.hu, April 4, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/04/sajat-emberei-ebresztettek-ra-orbant-hogy-a-virus-itt-van-a-nyakunkon>.

Third, the most striking sign of discrepancy between Orbán and his own party members manifested after WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic and the government ordered a state of emergency on March 11. The government introduced numerous confinement restrictions (see below) but refused to close schools, claiming COVID-19 did not infect children.¹¹ Orbán formally took control of the work of the Operational Group, but he was still not involved in decision making—later that day, he travelled to Chişinău to discuss bilateral relations between Moldova and Hungary. On March 13, while Orbán still argued that schools should not be closed as the virus “has primarily been brought into Hungary by foreigners, and is spreading among foreigners,”¹² members of the governing coalition feared that the decision not to close schools would result in social resistance and self-organization of teachers and parents. MPs of both Fidesz and KDNP sided with the opposition in requesting the closing of schools, and Orbán received the statement of parliamentary parties only shortly before it was proclaimed. Orbán ordered that schools be closed that evening.¹³

11 “Veszélyhelyzetet rendelt el a kormány [The Government Ordered a State of Emergency],” March 11, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/11/koronavirus-veszhelyzet_iskola_ovoda_bezaras_szunet_rendezvenyek_otthoni_karanten_kormany_sportesemenyek/.

12 Viktor Orbán, Radio programme “Good Morning Hungary,” Kossuth Rádió, March 13, 2020, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-9/>.

13 “Orbán: Hétfőtől bezárják az iskolákat [Orbán: Schools Close on Monday],” Index.hu, March 13, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/13/koronavirus_orban_viktor_vedekezes_jarvany_karanten_iskolak_bezaras/.

THE ENABLING ACT: REFRAMING NATION AND SECURITY

From then on, Orbán treated COVID-19 as a central issue, and he took “manual control” of the defense against the pandemic. From March 16, Orbán has chaired the meetings of the Operational Group, and he took infrastructural-logistical control of health care in his own hands.¹⁴ In the political arena, he managed to regain the narrative after the government submitted the Coronavirus Act, or the “Enabling Act” as it is usually referred to by opposition commentators.¹⁵ The Act¹⁶ approves the governmental decrees put into effect since March 11 (i.e., the restrictions following the declaration of state of emergency) and enables the government in advance to extend the effect of future emergency decrees, possibly deviating from ordinary law, until the end of the state of emergency. As the Fundamental Law of Hungary states that it is the government that can declare the end of a state of emergency, the Act—short of a sunset clause—allows the government to rule by decree until it sees fit. De jure, this power is constrained by (1) the parliament, which can revoke the Act, and (2) the Constitutional Court, which can nullify decrees not related to the crisis. De facto, Orbán’s autocratic setting has been built by placing clients of his single-pyramid patronal network in key positions, including the Constitutional Court and the MPs comprising his two-thirds majority.¹⁷ As a result of this political patronalization, the kind of disobedience described above had virtually never happened since the beginning of the Orbán regime (2010). Thus, the Act indeed harmonizes Orbán’s de facto and de jure authority, formally granting him the unconstrained power he had previously held only informally. (The Act also declares

14 Pál Dániel Rényi, “Járványkormányzás: Nem Vírusra Tesztelnek, Hanem Választópolgárokra [Epidemic Governance: Testing Not for the Virus but for the Voters],” 444, April 24, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/24/jarvanykormanyzas-nem-virusra-tesztelnek-hanem-valasztopolgarokra>.

15 For a fine legal analysis, see Kim Lane Scheppele, “Orban’s Emergency,” *Verfassungsblog* (blog), March 29, 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/orbans-emergency/>.

16 Eva S. Balogh, “Translation of Draft Law ‘On Protecting Against the Coronavirus,’” *Hungarian Spectrum* (blog), March 22, 2020, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/03/21/translation-of-draft-law-on-protecting-against-the-coronavirus/>.

17 Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State. The Case of Hungary*, (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016), 113–30; cf. Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

that, until the day following the end of the emergency, no referenda or midterm elections can be held, and already scheduled elections will be cancelled, but it does not mention general elections.)¹⁸

Talking about an authoritarian response to the pandemic, it is tempting to interpret the Act as the institutionalization of unconstrained power: using and abusing a situation when the emergency provides enough justification in people’s eyes to disable democratic checks for “effective crisis management.” But Orbán had already had unconstrained power, and there is nothing he can now achieve with the Act he could not achieve before under the autocratic setting he established. This is underlined by the fact that, apart from restricting the freedom of movement, the government has not used the “extra” power for anything it did not do earlier—extraordinary authority has been used for quite ordinary politics (ordinary for the Orbán regime), only now it is happening at a more accelerated pace. This includes several decrees that have, contrary to the Act, little or nothing to do with the pandemic, such as: annulling the decision of the City Council to stop building a “museum quarters” at the expense of Budapest’s City Park (*Városliget*); forbidding sex changes; changing the number of government-appointed board members in Budapest theaters; limiting the competences of local governments by creating 20 new bodies called “county and capital defense committees,” headed by 20 Fidesz politicians; and various economic measures, including the nationalization of certain companies (see below).¹⁹ The only novel change passed as part of the Act was that which criminalizes those who publicize fake or “genuine facts distorted in a way that can hamper successful protection,” although this restriction of freedom of speech has not been used against critical journalists yet.²⁰

Indeed, the Act helped Orbán not extend his power so much as regain his narrative. Fidesz deceived the opposition by inviting them to a parliamentary negotia-

18 Bakó Bea, “Tényleg diktatúrát csinál Orbán? Elmagyarázzuk a felhatalmazási törvényt! [Is Orbán Making a Dictatorship? We Explain the Enabling Act!],” *Azonnali.hu*, March 30, 2020, http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200330_most-akkor-diktaturat-csinal-orban-elmagyarazzuk-a-felhatalmazasi-torvenyt.

19 Eva S. Balogh, “Decrees That Have Nothing to Do with the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Hungarian Spectrum* (blog), April 1, 2020, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/04/01/decrees-that-have-nothing-to-do-with-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>; “Diktatúra-monitoringot működtet az MSZP [MSZP Starts Dictatorship-Monitoring],” *Népszava*, April 20, 2020, https://nepszava.hu/3075229_diktatura-monitoringot-mukodtet-az-mszp.

20 Cf. “Koronavírus: Rémhírterjesztés miatt emeltek vádat egy férfi ellen [COVID: One Man was Charged with Scaremongering],” *Magyar Hang*, May 6, 2020, <https://magyarhang.org/belfold/2020/05/06/koronavirus-remhirterjesztes-miatt-emeltek-vadat-egy-ferfi-ellen/>.

tion about the proposed Act on March 18, without telling them the bill would be submitted two days later.²¹ When the bill was submitted, the opposition MPs refused to support it or vote on it with urgency (something that would have required deviation from the Standing Orders of the Parliament and, therefore, a four-fifths majority). This gave Orbán the chance to blame the opposition for breaking unity in the fight against the pandemic and hampering the government's efforts in protecting the population, all for political gain.²² Furthermore, Orbán could expect that the Enabling Act would activate opposition reflexes and restart a debate, namely about democracy and the rule of law. This is a debate (1) he is already familiar and comfortable with, (2) his supporters know and understand as unjust criticism, and (3) ordinary citizens afraid of the crisis believe to be unnecessary criticism. In short, Orbán could use the Act to define a new political cleavage and activate those on both sides, making everyone play according to their roles: the opposition and the international environment criticizing Orbán, while he is posing as the protector and obstructed savior of the nation in a time of crisis. Government media interpreted the opposition's refusal to support the urgent vote on the bill as a "crime against humanity," and they started speaking about "pro-virus opposition."²³ A pro-government journalist in the parastatal channel HírTV opined that "certain opposition-leaning channels do not support the Hungarian people, the whole of Europe, or even the Hungarian economy, but openly support the virus," whereas another one on the same show went as far as to "recommend arresting them in such a state of emergency."²⁴

The Act passed on March 30 with only pro-government votes.²⁵ Since then, every kind of criticism against government measures has been interpreted according to

the outlined narrative, as attacks on the government rather than efforts to protect the Hungarian people. Between 2015 and now, the regime talked about "pro-migrant opposition" and used the anti-migration narrative—not because it was xenophobic per se but because it combined two elements: the feeling of security and populist nationalism (an ideological instrument used by Orbán since the early 2000s to depict himself and his paternal network as the only legitimate representative of the national interest).²⁶ The political result of the Act was reframing these two elements in the frame of the epidemic. In the regime's narrative, the condition of legitimacy and even of belonging to the nation²⁷ is no longer supporting whatever Orbán does under the threat of migration, but supporting whatever Orbán does under the threat of the epidemic.

RESTRICTIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS: FROM CRISIS MANAGEMENT TO AUTOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

As I mentioned, the state of emergency was needed to legalize restrictions on freedom of movement, or more generally, confinement restrictions. On March 11, the government announced the inflow of people from Italy, China, South Korea, and Iran would be restricted; indoor events with over 100 people and outdoor events with over 500 people would be banned; and universities would close, meaning only online (distance) learning would be allowed.²⁸ The latter measures were followed by the closing of primary and secondary schools, under the political conditions described above. The government has been criticized for not providing necessary digital

21 Rényi, "Saját Emberei Ébresztették Rá Orbánt, Hogy a Vírus Itt van a Nyakunkon."

22 András Stumpf, "A legelkeserítőbb bravúr [The Most Appalling Bravura]," *Heti Válasz*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/03/24/kiveteles-jogrend-felhatalmazasi-torveny-velemeny/>.

23 Dóra Diószegi-Horváth, "Nép elleni bűncselekmény, magyarság gyilkosai, víruspárti ellenzék – így értékelték a tegnapi napot a kormánylapok [Crime against humanity, murderers of Hungarians, pro-virus opposition – here is how yesterday was presented in government papers]," *Mérce*, March 24, 2020, <https://merce.hu/2020/03/24/nep-elleni-buncselekmeny-magyarsag-gyilkosai-virusparti-ellenzek-igy-ertekelték-a-tegnapi-napot-a-kormanylapok/>.

24 Magyarország Élőben Extra: Megadja Gáborral És Békés Mártonnal, HírTV, March 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFEubASGwt8>.

25 "Megszavazta az Országgyűlés a koronavírus-törvényt, Áder pedig ki is hirdette [Coronavirus Act Passes in the Parliament, Áder already Proclaimed It]," March 30, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/30/koronavirus-torveny_koronavirus_szavazas_parlament/.

26 Bálint Madlovics, "It's Not Just Hate: Attitudes toward Migrants in a Dominated Sphere of Communication in Hungary," in *After the Fence: Approaches and Attitudes about Migration in Central Eastern Europe*, ed. Dániel Mikecz, 1st ed. (Budapest: European Liberal Forum - Republikon Intézet, 2017), 6–31.

27 Cf. Eva S. Balogh, "László Kövér Calls Members of the Opposition Compradors in the Pay of the Jewish World Elite," *Hungarian Spectrum* (blog), April 30, 2020, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/04/29/laszlo-kover-calls-members-of-the-opposition-compradors-in-the-pay-of-the-jewish-world-elite/>.

28 "Veszélyhelyzetet rendelt el a kormány [The Government Ordered a State of Emergency]."

equipment for poorer students,²⁹ and for not being ready with a digital curriculum despite there being a government commissioner for digital education in place for the last four years.³⁰

On March 16, Orbán announced the second wave of restrictions: closing Hungarian borders from passenger traffic; closing nightclubs and movie theaters; banning outdoor events altogether; and restricting opening hours so that restaurants and cafés must close at 3 p.m.³¹ Finally, the third wave of restrictions came with the lockdown, originally issued by the Hungarian Government for two weeks (from March 28 to April 11). During the lockdown, people in Hungary were only allowed to leave their homes for “substantial reasons,” although the list of such activities ranges from work through shopping to hairdressers. In public spaces, people must keep a 1.5-meter distance from each other. While groceries, pharmacies, markets, and drugstores remain open (with limited opening hours in some cases), people over the age of 65 are allowed to visit these places between 9 a.m. and noon, while others are banned from entering during this time. Violating restrictions is punishable with a fine up to HUF 500 thousand (ca. EUR 1400).³² The stay-at-home regulations have been partially lifted in the countryside, while they have been prolonged indefinitely for Budapest and the agglomeration. From May 4, shops in the countryside have no limits on opening hours, and terraces and gardens of restaurants and open-air beaches and baths can open. Wearing facemasks in stores and on public transportation, however, is now compulsory nationwide.³³

While confinement restrictions clearly reflect the government’s aim to mitigate the epidemiological crisis,

29 “Akár Százezer Magyar Diák Is Kieshet a Digitális Oktatásból a Szegénység És Az Elszigeteltség Miatt [Up to One Hundred Thousand Hungarian Students May Drop out of Digital Education Due to Poverty and Isolation],” 168ora.hu, accessed May 8, 2020, <http://168ora.hu/itthon/digitalis-oktatas-szegenyseg-kimaradok-szamitogep-hozzaferes-kebelsberg-kozpont-diakok-184471>.

30 Zoltán Ceglédi, “Digitális oktatás – Czunyiné hol vagy? [Digital education - where are you, Czunyiné?],” hvg.hu, March 15, 2020, https://hvg.hu/kultura/20200315_Cegledi_digitalis_oktatas_Czunyine_hol_vagy.

31 “Orbán: Magyarország határait a személyforgalom előtt lezárjuk [Orbán: We Close Hungary’s Borders for Passenger Traffic],” Index.hu, March 16, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/16/orban_parlament_koronavirus_magyarorszagon/.

32 “Hungary Goes into Lockdown against Coronavirus,” Index.hu, March 27, 2020, https://index.hu/english/2020/03/27/coronavirus_hungary_lockdown/.

33 “Coronavirus in Hungary: Government Partially Lifts Stay-at-Home Order, Budapest Remains under Lockdown,” Index.hu, April 29, 2020, https://index.hu/english/2020/04/29/coronavirus_hungary_stay_at_home_order_partially_lifted/.

political motives also became visible before Easter. On April 3, Orbán said in a radio interview that the government would decide whether the lockdown would be prolonged to the long weekend, but no decision was made—instead, the decision as well as responsibility was given to local governments. According to Rényi, Orbán did not focus on epidemiological arguments but instead focused on the fact that the lockdown was a very divisive issue, especially during Easter. He also adds that “By default, the government tends to delay further restrictions because it does not want to exacerbate the economic damage caused by the crisis with nationwide closures, and thus suffer additional political damage.”³⁴ The decree that regulated the competences of mayors for Easter was published on April 9 in the evening, only one and a half hours before Good Friday.³⁵ Making a decision on such short notice, some mayors decided to close down their whole city (like Nagykovácsi, Nagymaros, and Zebegény), whereas there were examples of no or partial lockdowns as well (like Margaret Island and Normafa in Budapest).³⁶

Yet such steps point only to political motives, not distinctly authoritarian ones. The latter have manifested in the way the regime used COVID-19 as an excuse to cut state funding of the opposition, including both opposition parties and opposition-led local governments. The government used the ideological panel of “burden sharing” to legitimize channeling 50% of financing of every party to the special fund for the defense against the epidemic.³⁷ Indeed, this cut affects Fidesz as well but it deprives the opposition from one of its main sources of revenue, while the funding of Fidesz dwarfs in comparison to the state resources and public (as well as parastatal) channels Orbán uses for campaigning. Similarly, the cuts affecting local governments do affect Fidesz as well as opposition-led municipalities, but they predominantly hit the latter. As

34 Rényi, “Járványkormányzás.”

35 “Megjelent a rendelet, ezeket a jogosítványokat kapják a polgármesterek húsvét idejére [Here is the Decree about What Competences will Mayors have During Easter],” 24.hu, April 9, 2020, <https://24.hu/belfold/2020/04/09/koronavirus-husvet-kijarasi-korlatozas-lezaras-rendelet/>.

36 András Földes, “Ide NE menjen kirándulni húsvétkor! Meg ide se, meg ide se [Do NOT go here during Easter! And neither here, nor here],” Index.hu, April 11, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/11/kirandulas_kijarasi_korlatozas_lezarasok_margit-sziget_normafa_romai-part_szentendre_dunakanyar/.

37 “Különadókat vezet be a kormány, 1345 milliárd forint jut gazdaságvédelemre [The government introduces special taxes, 1345 billion forints are spent on protection of the economy],” Index.hu, April 4, 2020, https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/04/naponta_4_ezer_magyar_veszti_el_az_allasat_1345_milliard_forint_van_a_gazdasagvedelemre/.

an economic journalist reminds us,³⁸ approximately half of the revenues of local governments comes from the central budget and half from local taxes. The pandemic already puts local governments in a difficult position as (1) their revenues from the local business tax, which makes up one-quarter of total revenues, dropped significantly due to the pandemic, and (2) they must take on special tasks in social programs such as elderly care, nursing homes, catering for children, and care for the homeless.³⁹ Again referring to “burden sharing,” the government channeled the vehicle tax from local governments into the above-mentioned fund, and made public parking free in the country to “help social distancing.”⁴⁰ The tax makes up 1% of the income of county towns, as opposed to 1.6% in the case of local governments of the districts of Budapest, the majority of which has been led by opposition mayors since 2019. The parking fee is a less significant source of revenue but it is collected only by 49 local governments, led predominantly by opposition mayors.⁴¹ On April 7, a statement opposing the cut of municipal revenues was signed by 41 independent and opposition mayors, including Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Budapest.⁴² In contrast, a Fidesz mayor argued that the cuts should not cause any trouble where there is prudent financing, and “a good leader does not complain but makes the most of the given circumstances.”⁴³

Beyond normative cuts of funding, some opposition mayors also had to face discretionary or targeted budgetary withdrawals concerning only their municipality. The

38 Bucsky Péter, “Már azelőtt padlóra kerültek az önkormányzatok, hogy a kormány tovább ütötte volna őket [Local governments had been in a bad shape even before the government started hitting them],” *G7.hu*, April 7, 2020, <https://g7.hu/kozelet/20200407/mar-azelőtt-padlora-kerultek-az-onkormanyzatok-hogy-a-kormany-tovabb-utotte-volna-oket/>.

39 “Közös Közleményben Tiltakoznak Budapest Ellenzéki Polgármesterei a Kormány Megszorító Csomagja Miatt [Budapest Mayors Protest against Government Austerities in a Joint Statement],” *444.hu*, April 4, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/04/kozos-kozlemenyben-ertetlenkednek-budapest-ellenzeki-polgarmesterei-a-kormany-megszorito-csomagja-miatt>.

40 “Hétfőtől Díjmentes a Közterületi Parkolás [Public Parking Is Free from Monday],” Hungarian Government, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/hirek/heftol-dijmentes-a-kozteruleti-parkolas>.

41 Bucsky, “Már azelőtt padlóra kerültek az önkormányzatok, hogy a kormány tovább ütötte volna őket [Local governments had been in a bad shape even before the government started hitting them].”

42 Dóra Matalin, “41 polgármester tiltakozik az önkormányzatok kivézetése ellen,” April 7, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/07/polgarmesterek_nyilatkozat_ellenzek_tiltakozas_forraselvonas/.

43 “Fideszes polgármester baloldali kollégáinak: a jó vezető nem siránkozik! [Fidesz mayor to left-wing colleagues: a good leader does not complain!],” *Origo.hu*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20200407-karsay-ferenc-poszt.html>.

first type of such action is the reallocation of development support from the government. An example is Budapest’s District VIII, led by opposition mayor András Pikó who shared the letter of the Ministry of Internal Affairs informing him that HUF 1.125 billion (ca. EUR 3.216 million) of development support was taken from the district for the defense against the epidemic.⁴⁴ The second type of discretionary action can be seen in the example of the Göd and the factory of Samsung in the city, which was declared a “special economic zone” by the government (see below). As a result the state took over regulatory duties over the area and directed the local business tax paid by Samsung from Göd’s opposition local government to the Fidesz-dominated county government. This effectively means cutting Göd’s budget by one-third.⁴⁵

SELECTIVE INFORMATION, TESTING, AND COMMUNICATION

In an open letter, the mayors of Budapest resented that “district governments do not receive substantial support from the government to address the health and social crisis, but they do not even receive satisfactory information. Neither the government offices nor the Operational Group provide information to facilitate crisis management, answers to our questions and suggestions are delayed or do not arrive at all.”⁴⁶ This leads us to the regime’s policy of sharing information, which has changed parallel to its changing political attitude to the epidemic.

The Hungarian government decided to publish detailed data about confirmed cases of coronavirus only three weeks after the first infections were confirmed. While still treating COVID-19 as a sub-issue to migration, they shared information about the nationality of those affected but not their age, gender, or spatial distribution. Government representatives argued that such data may

44 “Lemondásra szólította fel Pikó András Kocsis Mátét az önkormányzattól elvont támogatások miatt [András Pikó asked Máté Kocsis to step down because of the withdrawn aid],” *Mérce*, May 7, 2020, <https://merce.hu/2020/05/07/mandatumanak-visszaadasara-szolította-fel-piko-andras-kocsis-matet-az-onkormanyzattol-elvont-tamogatások-miatt/>.

45 Máté Világi, “Göd az adóbevételei egyharmadától esik el egy új kormányrendelet miatt [Göd loses one-third of its tax revenues due to the new government decree],” *Index.hu*, April 18, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/18/koronavirus_magyarorszagon_kormanyrendelet_god_samsung/.

46 “Közös Közleményben Tiltakoznak Budapest Ellenzéki Polgármesterei a Kormány Megszorító Csomagja Miatt [Budapest Mayors Protest against Government Austerities in a Joint Statement].”

not be published because they are sensitive.⁴⁷ In his investigative report, Rényi found it otherwise:

To win time for the government, the communications crew began to curb the speed of public information [...]. Epidemiological data were disclosed selectively to give the communications staff one step advantage over the public and the decision-makers, time to measure and monitor public opinion before announcing any further action. [...] 'If people don't know where there is the virus and where there isn't, they don't panic on the one hand and don't develop a false sense of security on the other hand,' explained a Secretary of State. He said this calculation was very successful; true, it was fortunate, too, that the epidemic did not break out in Hungary as it did in certain Western European countries.⁴⁸

The weakness of the argument about sensitive data is further showed by the fact that the government eventually shared spatial data on its coronavirus information website, *koronavirus.gov.hu*. Set up on March 4, the website provides news, up-to-date information about governmental restrictions, and guides about the virus and about what people should do during the pandemic. It also contains the spatial data and data about the deceased, namely their gender, age, and underlying conditions.⁴⁹ According to the instructions of Miklós Kásler, the Minister of Human Resources (responsible for healthcare as well as education, culture, social and labor issues, and sports), if a deceased person who had COVID-19 infection also has a history of a critical illness, chronic illness or condition that could have resulted in death on its own, the known chronic illnesses and their acute complications should be listed as cause of death.⁵⁰ Kásler also forbade hospitals to communicate about the state of the epidemic, and they must direct all inquiries from the media to the

47 Cseke Balázs, "Koronavírus: nálunk szenzitív adat az, amit a legtöbb európai ország közül [COVID: What Most European Countries Publish Is Sensitive Information in Hungary]," *Index.hu*, March 16, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/16/koronavirus_magyarorszagon_operativ_torzsz_teruleti_adatok_nem_eletkor/.

48 Rényi, "Saját Emberei Ébresztették Rá Orbánt, Hogy a Vírus Itt van a Nyakunkon."

49 "Elhunytak [Deceased]," *Koronavirus.gov.hu*, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://koronavirus.gov.hu/elhunytak>.

50 Joób Sándor, "Nem a koronavírusos halálozás eltitkolásáról szól Kásler Miklós levele [Miklós Kásler's Mail is Not about Concealing COVID Deaths]," *Index.hu*, March 23, 2020, https://index.hu/tech/hoax/2020/03/23/koronavirus_jarvany_kasler_miklos_halaloki_statisztika_halottvizsgalati_bizonyitvany_statisztika_emmi/.

Operational Group.⁵¹

Independent journalists found evidence for potential data manipulation as well.⁵² Originally, the official weekly influenza reports of the National Public Health Center showed a sudden growth in the number of patients with suspected influenza on 11th and 12th weeks of 2020 (i.e., the weeks starting on March 9 and 16). The data showed the Center received 1,248 and 2,855 new samples in the two weeks, respectively. However, these two figures have been changed in the official report to 165 and 70, respectively. No official explanation has been given. Another reason for suspicion is that, after the two weeks in question, weekly reporting about patients with suspected influenza stopped, and it restarted only on May 6.

Besides selective and potentially manipulated information, the official number of confirmed cases may understate the actual number of COVID-19 infections in Hungary because of the low number of diagnostic testing. According to the OECD, the average testing ratio in OECD37 is 27.7 tests per 1,000 people. In Hungary, the ratio is 8.5, which is the fifth lowest among the 37 examined countries (only Mexico, Japan, Colombia, and Greece test less).⁵³ Cecília Müller, the Surgeon General of Hungary argued there is no need for testing as "there is no test that would prevent the spread of the epidemic."⁵⁴ In addition, while most European countries publish the number of people tested for COVID-19, the Hungarian

51 "Kásler megtiltotta a kórházaknak, hogy a járványügyi helyzetről nyilatkozzanak [Kásler forbade hospitals to communicate about the state of the epidemic]," *Index.hu*, April 26, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/26/kasler_megtillotta_a_korhazaknak_hogy_a_jarvanyugyi_helyzetrol_nyilatkozzanak/. "how az MSZP elnöke kérdéseket tett fel a kórházaknak.", "container-title": "Index.hu", "language": "hu", "note": "source: index.hu", "title": "Kásler megtiltotta a kórházaknak, hogy a járványügyi helyzetről nyilatkozzanak [Kásler forbade hospitals to communicate about the state of the epidemic]", "URL": "https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/26/kasler_megtillotta_a_korhazaknak_hogy_a_jarvanyugyi_helyzetrol_nyilatkozzanak/", "accessed": {"date-parts": [{"2020", 5, 8}]}, "issued": {"date-parts": [{"2020", 4, 26]}}}, "schema": "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"

52 Élő Anita, "Több ezer vizsgálati minta tűnt el a héten a népegészségügyi központ adatai közül. Mit titkolnak? [Thousands of test samples were removed from the data of the National Public Health Center. What is kept in secret?]," *Válasz.hu*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/05/08/nnk-honlap-influenza-koronavirus-adatok/>.

53 "Testing for COVID-19: A Way to Lift Confinement Restrictions," *OECD*, May 4, 2020, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129658-l62d71r66u&title=Testing-for-COVID-19-A-way-to-lift-confinement-restrictions.

54 "Müller Cecília: Nincs az a teszt, ami meggátolná a járvány terjedését [Cecília Müller: There is No Test that Would Prevent the Spread of the Epidemic]," *hvg.hu*, March 30, 2020, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200330_Koronavirus_az_Operativ_Torzsz_hefoi_tajekoztatoja.

government publishes “the number of samples examined in accredited laboratories,” which sometimes includes two to three tests per person.⁵⁵ At a government conference, epidemiological scholars who help the government devise action plans against the virus confirmed that the number of 52,409 tests administered as of April 20 means that 32,503 people have been tested, which is about 0.3% of the Hungarian population.⁵⁶

This government conference was the only time the regime shared the scientific findings upon which it bases its strategy against the epidemic. No background study or report for the decision makers has been published. Beyond revealing technical data about the models the government uses, Beatrix Oroszi, epidemiologist and the science director of National Public Health Center also argued for a new strategy involving more tests. László Palkovics, the Minister of Innovation and Technology also confirmed at the conference that the government would conduct more tests to reveal the ratio of people who have been infected with COVID-19.⁵⁷ Countrywide testing by four domestic medical schools using a representative sample of nearly 18 thousand randomly selected people began on April 29.⁵⁸ The sample was collected between May 1 and 14, providing the information that is necessary for careful relaxation of restrictions, avoiding—as one participant at the conference warned—the sudden growth of the reproduction rate of the virus. However, the government already started to relax confinement restrictions on May 4, i.e., before the data collection could have been finished.

Going back to communication, the coronavirus information website, which is accompanied by a Face-

book page with currently over 149 thousand followers,⁵⁹ is the first of four important channels where the government communicates about the epidemic in Hungary. The second one is the information campaign carried out on billboards, newspapers, TV, and social media. The campaign disseminates information about the restrictions through this second channel, as well as the forms of behavior expected to minimize the risk of infection (e.g., the elderly should stay at home, handshakes should be avoided).⁶⁰ On May 3, a campaign to popularize the government’s economic measures was started as well.⁶¹ The third channel is the use of the Operational Group which holds regular press conferences, usually featuring Cecilia Müller and two officers from law enforcement. While the Group is co-headed by the Minister of Human Resources and the Minister of the Interior, the prominence of law enforcement officials has been obvious: among its nine other members besides the two ministers, the Group includes four medical doctors and five people from law enforcement.⁶² The Minister of Human Resources, Miklós Kásler rarely appears in public (according to investigative journalists, Orbán is dissatisfied with his performance)⁶³ and neither does the Secretary of State for Health, Ildikó Horváth. The medical line in the government is represented by Müller, who informs the public at the press conferences about the latest developments of the epidemic, including the number of infections and deaths and the government’s latest measures to prevent the spread of the virus.⁶⁴ Finally, the Facebook page of Viktor Orbán has become a major channel for propaganda as well as official information. According to Rényi, communication has been centralized to such an extent that even the govern-

59 “Koronavírus tájékoztató oldal [Coronavirus Information Page],” accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/koronavirus.gov.hu/>

60 “A koronavírusról indít tájékoztató kampányt a kormány [The Government Starts Information Campaign About COVID],” Index.hu, March 6, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/06/a_koronavirusrol_indit_tajekoztato_kampanyt_a_kormany/.

61 “Plakátkampány Indul a Kormányzati Intézkedések Népszerűsítésére [Billboard Campaign Starts to Popularize Governmental Measures],” 444.hu, May 3, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/05/03/plakatkampany-indul-a-kormanyzati-intezkedesek-nepszerusitesere>.

62 “1012/2020. (I. 31.) Korm. Határozat a Koronavírus-Járvány Elleni Védekezésért Felelős Operatív Törzs Felállításáról [1012/2020. (I. 31.) Govt. Resolution on the Establishment of an Operational Group Responsible for Defense against the Coronavirus Epidemic],” accessed May 6, 2020, <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A20H1012.KOR>.

63 Tamás Fábán, “A láthatatlan miniszter [The Invisible Minister],” Index.hu, April 24, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/24/kasler_miklos_koronavirus_orban_viktor_egeszsegugy/.

64 “Magyarország Kormánya [Government of Hungary],” YouTube Channel, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/user/kormanyhu/search?query=operat%C3%ADv+%C3%B6rzs>.

55 “A DK pert indít, amiért nem mondják el, hány embert teszteltek le eddig [DK Begins a Lawsuit for Not Telling How Many People have been Tested],” Index.hu, April 26, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/26/a_dk_pert_indit_amiert_nem_mondjak_el_hany_embert_teszteltek_le_eddig/.

56 A Járvány matematikai És Egyéb Kutatások Szerepe a Koronavírussal Szembeni Védekezésben [The Role of Epidemiological Mathematical and Other Researches in the Defense Against COVID], Információs és Technológiai Minisztérium, Budapest, April 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7vnYzm00g>.

57 Dániel Bolcsó, “Új stratégia: sokkal többet tesztelnék [New Strategy: We Would Test Much More],” Index.hu, April 26, 2020, https://index.hu/techtud/2020/04/26/koronavirus_jarvany_magyarorszag_jarvanykezeles_strategia_korlatozasok_lazitas_nyajimmunitas_teszteles/.

58 “Országos szűrővizsgálat-sorozatba kezdenek a hazai orvosképzők [Domestic Medical Schools begin Countrywide Testing],” April 28, 2020, <https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/orszagosszurovizsgalat-sorozatba-kezdenek-hazai-orvoskepzoek>.

ment media do not have much original content, and they mostly just follow the PM's staff.⁶⁵

Rényi also cites an insider, who succinctly sums up how important the image is for the regime: "It is a mistake to say the government doesn't test much. Only they don't test for the virus but for the voters. More opinion polls are made for insiders than in any period in the last two-three years." As he explains, the parastatal think-tank Századvég conducts polls with 500–1000 people via telephone on a daily basis. Orbán "receives the results in the morning, after the meeting of the Operational Group, and he usually examines them together with the fresh media monitoring."⁶⁶ At the same time, outlets that are critical of the performance of the regime have been labelled as "fake news media" in governmental outlets.⁶⁷

LACK OF EQUIPMENT AND THE TRANSITION OF HEALTHCARE TO CRISIS MODE

The state and parastatal media have also been occupied with the opposition mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, who they blame for the spread of the virus in nursing homes. Nursing homes are known to be hot spots of the epidemic in European countries as well as North America. In Hungary, 22.7% of the cases were related to other closed communities like nursing homes, where 14 local epidemics were identified.⁶⁸ The infamous case of Pesti út nursing home counts 223 confirmed cases of COVID-19 (including 19 employees) and 23 deaths as of 20 April.⁶⁹

In his defense, Karácsony published four letters revealing that government representatives rejected his proposal to send elderly people back to nursing homes from

hospitals only after they tested negative for COVID-19.⁷⁰ According to existing laws in Hungary, it is the duty of the government offices to conduct testing and provide protective equipment.⁷¹ These include, among other things, masks, gloves, disinfectant, and protective clothing. Accordingly, Budapest local government asked for at least 5 million surgeon masks, 20 thousand protective suits, 500 thousand gloves, and 1 million FFP2 masks from the government. In contrast, the Ministry of Internal Affairs supplied 20 thousand surgeon masks on March 27, and another 20 thousand surgeon masks, 1 thousand protective suits, 9 thousand gloves, 500 IgG tests, and 50 thermometers from the supplies of National Healthcare Services Center. The 11 nursing homes in Budapest received 35,800 surgeon masks, 16 thousand single-use gloves, and 200 FFP2 masks.⁷² These numbers dwarf in comparison to the government's aid to foreign countries, too: 600 thousand masks and 30 thousand protective suits were sent to Croatia, Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia; 710 thousand masks, 32 thousand protective suits and 200 thousand gloves were sent to Hungarians abroad.⁷³ On April 30, the local government of Budapest started a public procurement procedure for 1.5 million surgeon masks, 250 thousand FFP2 masks, and 300 thousand gloves, paying over half a billion HUF (ca. 1.4 million EUR) altogether.⁷⁴

On March 19, it was acknowledged at the government's press conference that there was a shortage of protective supplies in healthcare as well, and in some

70 "Öntsünk Tiszta Vízet a Pohárba! 4 Levél, Amelyből Kiderül, Hogy Mi Vezethetett a Járvány Terjedéséhez Az Időotthonokban [Let's Make Things Clear! 4 Letters That Reveal the Reason of the Spread of the Virus in Nursing Homes]," Budapest Város Önkormányzata, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://koronavirus.budapest.hu/blog/2020/04/10/ontsunk-tiszta-vizet-a-poharba-4-level-amelybol-kiderul-hogy-mi-vezethetett-a-jarvany-terjedesehez-az-idosotthonokban/>.

71 "Karácsony Gergely: Kezdjünk el azon gondolkodni, május közepétől hogyan lazítsunk a szigorításokon! [Let us start thinking about how restrictions may be relaxed from mid-May!]," Azonnali.hu, April 15, 2020, http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200415_karacsony-gergely-kezdjunk-el-azon-gondolkodni-majus-kozepetol-hogyan-lehetne-lazitani-a-szigoritasokon.

72 Zoltán Hanász and Illés Szurovecz, "A Kormány a Balkánra Is Több Védőeszközt Küldött, Mint a Fővárosi Önkormányzatnak [Even the Balkans Receive More Protective Equipment from the Government than the Municipal Government of Budapest]," 444.hu, April 16, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/16/a-kormany-a-balkanra-is-tobb-vedoeszkozt-kuldott-mint-a-fovarosi-onkormanyzatnak>.

73 Hanász and Szurovecz, "A Kormány a Balkánra Is Több Védőeszközt Küldött, Mint a Fővárosi Önkormányzatnak".

74 Eszter Katus, "Koronavírus: Több Mint Félmilliárd Forintért Vesz Maszkokat a Fővárosi Önkormányzat [COVID: The Local Government of the Capital Buys Masks for over Half Billion Forints]," Átlátszó Blog (blog), April 30, 2020, <https://blog.atlatszo.hu/2020/04/koronavirus-tobb-mint-felmilliard-forintert-vesz-maszkokat-a-fovarosi-okormanyzat/>.

65 Rényi, "Járványkormányzás." In addition to Facebook, Orbán also communicates through the state-owned Kossuth Rádió every Friday, although the "Friday interview" had been regular for Orbán for years.

66 Rényi, "Járványkormányzás."

67 Ágnes Urbán, "A független média végnapjai [The Final Days of Independent Media?]" Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, March 22, 2020, <https://mertek.eu/2020/03/22/a-fuggetlen-media-vegnapjai/>.

For examples, see Hamis Állítások a Tesztekről [False Statements about Testing], M1 - Híradó, April 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pp6TOHJ-93E>; "Századvég - FAKE NEWS FIGYELŐ," accessed May 7, 2020, <https://szazadveg.hu/hu/kutatasok/az-alapitvany-kutatasai/fake-news-figyelo>.

68 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

69 "233 fertőzött a Pesti úti idősek otthonában, 23-an haltak meg [223 people infected in Pest út nursing home, 23 people died]," hvg.hu, April 20, 2020, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200420_233_fertozott_a_Pesti_uti_idosek_otthonaban_23an_haltak_meg.

cases doctors and nurses need to disinfect and reuse single-use protective equipment.⁷⁵ In April, the government and particularly the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, acquired over 80 million surgeon masks from various countries, although it is not communicated how these masks are distributed in Hungary.⁷⁶ Arguably, much of the purchased equipment is used in healthcare, but that the supply is insufficient is exemplified by the fact that doctors and nurses still comprise a significant ratio of confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection. As of April 23, 30.6% of the infections were related to healthcare institutions, 34 local epidemics occurred in 20 hospitals (433 patients and 143 hospital workers were infected).⁷⁷

As of May 4, out of the 3,035 confirmed cases, 1,027 patients or 33.8% received hospital treatment, and 55 patients or 1.8% were in critical condition, that is, in need of breathing machines.⁷⁸ These numbers are lower than those in April—when more than half of the infected received hospital treatment and over 3% were in critical condition—and closer to the April data of European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) which showed the averages of other countries were 29.6% and 2.4%, respectively.⁷⁹ However, the government began preparations in healthcare for the peak of the epidemic, which they awaited for on May 3.⁸⁰ In line with the regime's autocratic norms, what course of action would be followed in healthcare was decided—just like the entire strategy of the epidemic—without discussions

75 "Gulyás Miniszter Elismerte, Hogy Egyszer Használatos Védőfelszereléseket Használhatnak Fel Újra Az Egészségügyben [Minister Gulyás Admitted That Single-Use Protective Equipments Are Used Multiple Times in Healthcare]," 444, March 19, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/03/19/gulyas-miniszter-elismerte-hogy-egyszer-hasznalatos-vedofelszereléseket-hasznalhatnak-fel-ujra-az-egeszsegugyben>.
76 Rényi, "Járványkormányzás."
77 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."
78 "3035 főre nőtt a beazonosított fertőzöttek száma és elhunyt 11 idős beteg [3,035 confirmed cases, 11 elderly patients died]," Koronavírus Sajtóközpont, May 4, 2020, <https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/3035-fore-nott-beazonosított-fertőzöttek-száma-es-elhunyt-11-idos-beteg>.
79 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."
80 "Orbán: Május 3-ra várják a járvány csúcsát Magyarországon [Orbán: The Peak of the Epidemic in Hungary is Awaited on 3 May]," Index.hu, April 19, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/19/koronavirus_orban_viktor_facebook_video/.

76 Rényi, "Járványkormányzás."

77 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

78 "3035 főre nőtt a beazonosított fertőzöttek száma és elhunyt 11 idős beteg [3,035 confirmed cases, 11 elderly patients died]," Koronavírus Sajtóközpont, May 4, 2020, <https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/3035-fore-nott-beazonosított-fertőzöttek-száma-es-elhunyt-11-idos-beteg>.

79 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

80 "Orbán: Május 3-ra várják a járvány csúcsát Magyarországon [Orbán: The Peak of the Epidemic in Hungary is Awaited on 3 May]," Index.hu, April 19, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/19/koronavirus_orban_viktor_facebook_video/.

with those involved, or autonomous actors of civil society in general. Particularly, the government did not conduct any meaningful conversation with the Hungarian Medical Association (MOK), which published numerous criticisms and proposals during March and April. To cite two characteristic examples of government responses, the Ministry of Human Resources called MOK's statement on March 11 about insufficient protective equipment "extortion" in times of crisis,⁸¹ whereas a month later Kásler reacted to an open letter of MOK as "creating tension and uncertainty" and opined that MOK should refrain from making political statements like open letters.⁸²

In healthcare, the "transition to crisis mode" has involved both expansion of and freeing up existing capacities. Starting with the former, the government ordered the building of so-called mobile epidemic hospitals in Budapest, Miskolc, Szekszárd, Ajka, and Kiskunhalas.⁸³ These mobile hospitals are built exclusively for those with COVID-19 infections. The first such institution was finished in late April on the territory of the Kiskunhalas prison, and it can accept 150 patients in total and 16 patients in critical condition (i.e., it has 16 intensive care beds with breathing machines).⁸⁴ On April 10 in his "Friday interview" Orbán spoke about the need of 7,500–8,000 breathing machines, of which Hungary had only 2,000 at the time.⁸⁵ As it was later revealed, the government calculated that 2,000 machines would be enough only if the number of contacts between people could be reduced by half, but the government believed the number of contacts could be reduced only by one-fifth or one-third, and thus the country would need 7,330 breathing machines at the peak of the epidemic.⁸⁶ On April 16, it was announced

81 "Emmi: Példátlan, hogy az orvosi kamara vészhelyzetben próbálja zsarolni a kormányt! [EMMI: It is unprecedented that the medical association tries to extort the government!]," Index.hu, March 11, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/11/emmi_magyar_orvosi_kamara_eszkozok_koronavirus_beef/.

82 "Kásler szerint a Magyar Orvosi Kamara feszültséget kelt [According to Kásler, MOK creates tension]," Index.hu, April 19, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/19/kasler_miklos_levele_politizal_az_orvosi_kamara_alaassa_a_bizalmat/.

83 "Újabb kórházak lépnek hadba [New Hospitals are Deployed]," Népszava, March 17, 2020, <https://nepszava.hu/3071020-ujabb-korhazak-lepnek-hadba>.

84 Dániel Simor and Ádám Trencsényi, "Megnéztük a két hét alatt felhúzott járványkórházat [We checked the isolation hospital built in two weeks]," Index.hu, April 24, 2020, https://index.hu/video/2020/04/24/jarvanykorhaz_koronavirus_kiskunhalas_mobilkorhaz_bejaras/.

85 "Orbán: 7500-8000 lélegeztetőgép kellhet majd [Orbán: we will need 7,500-8,000 breathing machines]," Index.hu, April 10, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/10/orban_7500-8000_lelegeztetogep_kell_majd/.

86 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

that Hungary ordered 15 thousand machines in case not all of them would arrive in the country.⁸⁷

Freeing up existing capacities involved, first, the restrictions regarding primary healthcare of non-COVID patients. The Ministry of Human Resources ordered that, from March 16, state healthcare will provide only emergency care, that is, treatment to avoid death or permanent damage to health.⁸⁸ General practitioner care, dentistry, one-day care, transplants, and private care were restricted until May 4, when these were allowed again under strict hygienic conditions.⁸⁹ However, the freeing up of primary health care capacities was somewhat offset by the reduction in the number of healthcare workers: the Ministry ordered doctors and nurses over the age of 65 not to meet their patients, and distant consultations were recommended instead. The population of healthcare providers in Hungary is aging, especially medical doctors, with 20.4% of active doctors over the age of 65.⁹⁰ In March, Orbán stated that there were 19,431 doctors under the age of 65, 4,312 residents, 690 medical students in their final year, and 105,000 other medical workers who can be deployed against the pandemic.⁹¹

Second, a government decision was made on April 7 to make 60% of beds in state hospitals available to the treatment of COVID patients.⁹² According to the February report of National Health Insurance Fund, there were 67,543 hospital beds in Hungary, 41,147 of which

were active—i.e., used for typically short-term curative, preventive, or rehabilitative care—and 26,396 were chronic—i.e., used for typically long-term stabilization and maintenance of state of health. Approximately 72% of the former and 88% of the latter were in use.⁹³ It is unclear whether the government decision regards reducing both types of bed use, but there have been numerous reports in Hungarian media about chronic patients, patients in need of constant care, and even chronically ill patients being sent home.⁹⁴ On the one hand, there have certainly been mistakes due to the short deadline: the government gave hospital leaders eight days to empty the needed number of beds. It even happened that a patient recovering after surgery was sent home, and it later turned out that he was infected with COVID-19.⁹⁵ On the other hand, the government did force the reduction of bed use even if a hospital could only release chronically ill patients. This attitude manifested most clearly in the case of the National Institute of Medical Rehabilitation (OORI), where every patient whose treatment could be postponed had already been sent home by the second half of March. Regardless, Kásler removed Péter Cserháti, the director of OORI on April 12 for refusing to free up 233 further beds.⁹⁶ The decision was met with disapproval from OORI employees and the public alike.⁹⁷

87 "15 ezer lélegeztetőgépet rendelt Magyarország [Hungary ordered 15 thousand breathing machines]," *Azonnali.hu*, April 16, 2020, http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200416_15-ezer-lelegeztetogepet-rendelt-magyarorszag.

88 "Emmi: Hétfőtől a 65 Év Feletti Orvosok És Ápolók Ne Találkozzanak Betegekkel [EMMI: Doctors and Nurses above 65 Must Not Meet Patients from Monday]," *Index.hu*, March 15, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/15/kasler_miklos_jarobeteg_szakellatas_hatvanot_even_feluli_orvosok/.

89 "Kásler elrendelte: hétfőtől újraindul az egészségügyi ellátás [Patient care can restart on Monday, Kásler ordered]," *Index.hu*, May 2, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/05/02/koronavirus_egeszsegugy_ujraindul_kasler_miklos/.

90 "Beszámoló Az Egységes Ágazati Humánerőforrás-Monitoringrendszer Adatai Alapján Az Ágazati Humánerőforrás 2018. Évi Helyzetéről [Report on the Situation of the Sectoral Human Resources in 2018 Based on the Data of the Unified Sectoral Human Resources Monitoring System]," *Állami Egészségügyi Ellátó Központ*, July 1, 2019, https://www.enkk.hu/hmr/documents/beszamolok/HR_beszamolok_2018.pdf.

91 Zoltán Kovács, "Orbán: Economic Relief Package Expanded as Mass Coronavirus Infections Are Expected," *Index.hu*, March 23, 2020, https://index.hu/english/2020/03/23/coronavirus_hungary_viktor_orban_fidesz_economic_relief_package_2/.

92 "Koronavírus: nyolc nap alatt mintegy 36 ezer ágyat kell kiüríteniük a kórházaknak [COVID: hospitals need to empty 36 thousand beds in eight days]," 2020.04.09., *Népszava*, accessed May 8, 2020, https://nepszava.hu/3074040_koronavirus-nyolc-nap-alatt-mintegy-36-ezer-agyat-kell-kiuriteniuk-a-korhazaknak.

93 "Jelentés a Fekvőbeteg-Szakellátás Teljesítményéről [Report on the Performance of Inpatient Special Care]" *Nemzeti Egészségbiztosítási Alapkezelő*, February 2020, http://neak.gov.hu/data/cms1025965/hf_202002.pdf.

94 "A folyamatos ápolásra szoruló betegeket is hazaküldik a járvány miatt [Patients in need of constant care are sent home because of the epidemic]," *24.hu*, April 12, 2020, <https://24.hu/belfold/2020/04/12/koronavirus-jahn-ferenc-korhaz-kiurites-jarvany/>.

95 Joó Hajnalka, "Koronavírusosan került haza a kórházból a műtét után lábadozó beteg [Patient recovering after surgery goes home with COVID]," *hvg.hu*, April 15, 2020, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200415_koronavirus_beteg_janos_korhaz_mutet.

96 Joób Sándor, "Kásler Miklós menesztette a Rehabilitációs Intézet főigazgatóját is [Miklós Kásler removed the director of the Institute of Medical Rehabilitation]," *Index.hu*, April 12, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/12/kasler_miklos_menesztette_a_rehabilitacios_intezet_foigazgatojat_is/.

97 Luca Pintér, "Egymásnak feszül az OORI stábjá és a kormány a leváltott igazgató miatt [Tension between the OORI staff and the government over the replaced director]," *Index.hu*, April 13, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/13/oori_dolgozok_nyilt_level/.

ECONOMIC MEASURES: NORMATIVE AND DISCRETIONAL

As Orbán did not regard COVID-19 to be a central issue until mid-March, no preparations for the economic crisis to come were made either. According to a Hungarian economist who analyzed the government's allocations between February and the March 11 (the ordering of the state of emergency), the government (1) made ordinary decisions, such as the financing of cultural and sports events which are incompatible with the future restrictions, and (2) did not build up reserves but reallocated monies from existing ones, for purposes like ministerial administration and supporting events and institutions commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon.⁹⁸ Yet economic crisis did come, primarily as a result of the above-described confinement restrictions. Service providers like restaurants, nightclubs, and movie theaters were closed; 86 thousand shops, including restaurants and cafes, were allowed to stay open until 3 p.m. (50 thousand shops could remain open without limits).⁹⁹ The ban on outdoor events also meant that summer festivals like Sziget and Balaton Sound could not be organized in their usual form, and experts estimate that this could cause a loss of income for the Hungarian economy up to almost 1% of the GDP.¹⁰⁰ The most significant restriction, however, was none other than the lockdown when Hungarians were ordered to stay at home and allowed to spend their money in person only at grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations, pet shops, marketplaces, hairdressers, cleaners, and taxis. Credit card statistics collected by Budapest Bank show a spending drop in clothing by 71%, in restaurants by 75% (they can still do home delivery), in travelling by 86%, and in hotels and motels by

98 Mária Zita Petschnig, "Mit Csinált Felső 3-Tól 5-Ig? Orbán Tudta, de Nem Tette [What Did Thine Majesty Do between 3 and 5? Orbán Knew, but Did Not Do]," *Élet És Irodalom* 64, no. 17 (April 24, 2020).

99 "Ezt kell tudni a boltok nyitvatartásáról [What needs to be known about the opening hours of shops]," *Infostart.hu*, March 20, 2020, <https://infostart.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/20/ezt-kell-tudni-a-boltok-nyitvatartasarol>.

100 Főző Zsolt, "Hatalmas kárt okozhat Magyarországnak, ha őszig elmaradnak a fesztiválok [It Can Be Disastrous if No Festivals Happen until Autumn]," *Portfolio.hu*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20200429/hatalmas-kart-okozhat-magyarorszag-nak-ha-oszig-elmaradnak-a-fesztivalok-428958>.

98%.¹⁰¹ The economic sentiment index of GKI Economic Research plummeted by an unprecedented extent of almost 30 points in April, whereas the business confidence index declined about 25 points and the consumer one, by nearly 40 points.¹⁰² True, this may be affected not only by government restrictions but other sources of the crisis, particularly the temporary outage of international car factories¹⁰³ and the deterioration of foreign markets for products made in Hungary in general. GKI forecasts a 3–7% decline in Hungary's GDP for the year,¹⁰⁴ in line with the estimates of JP Morgan (minus 6.3%).¹⁰⁵

On the one hand, a series of normative, fiscal, and monetary policy measures were implemented to mitigate the prevailing crisis. The first package was announced on March 18–23 March, and it contained mainly prompt responses for the most affected sectors: rent control for tourism, various cultural sectors, and sports; tax relief for taxi drivers, media providers, and 86 thousand small and medium-sized enterprises; and changing labor regulations to allow employers to alter work schedules anytime. Among its more general measures, the package also included the suspension of all evictions and foreclosures, prolonging child care allowances and child care benefits, and—most significantly—a loan moratorium, whereby all payment obligations related to loans paid out before March 18 to businesses or private individuals are suspended for the duration of the state of emergency. The second package, announced on April 6 and 16, involved measures focusing more on companies and sectors still operating during the lockdown, as well as job protection and creation. Such measures were: sup-

101 Dávid Molnár, "Ruhára a harmadát, étteremre a negyedét költjük annak, amit tavaly ilyenkor [We Spend One Third for Clothing and One Fourth for Restaurants, Compared to Last Year]," *24.hu*, April 24, 2020, <https://24.hu/elet-stilus/2020/04/24/koronavirus-bevasarlas-bankkartyas-fizetes-statisztika/>.

102 "GKI's Economic Sentiment Index Plummeted by an Unprecedented Extent in April," GKI Gazdaságkutató Zrt., April 26, 2020, <https://www.gki.hu/language/en/2020/04/26/the-gki-consumer-confidence-index-plummeted-in-april/>.

103 Gergely Brückner, "Mit jelent Magyarország gazdaságának az autógyárak leállása? [What does the outage of car factories mean for the Hungarian economy?]," *Index.hu*, March 20, 2020, https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/20/mit-jelent-magyarorszag-gazdasaganak_az-autogyarak-leallasa/.

104 "Forecast for 2020: 3 or 7 Percent Decline," GKI Gazdaságkutató Zrt., March 23, 2020, <https://www.gki.hu/language/en/2020/03/23/forecast-for-2020-2/>.

105 "400 forintos euró, magasan ragadó költségvetési hiány: egy friss elemzés szerint csak jövőre jön a neheze Magyarországon [400 HUF/EUR, high deficit: a new analysis says the hard part comes next year]," *Portfolio.hu*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20200416/400-forintos-euro-magasan-ragado-koltsegetesi-hiany-egy-friss-elemzes-szerint-csak-jovore-jon-a-neheze-magyarorszagon-426208>.

port for investment in the amount of HUF 450 billion (ca. EUR 1.29 billion); subsidized loans for enterprises in the amount of HUF 2 trillion (ca. EUR 5.72 billion); social contribution tax cuts; imposition of a tax on small enterprises (*kiva*), a tax on tourism (100% relief until December 31), a tax on SZÉP cards, and VAT of new homes; and various reliefs and postponements in tax administration. The government extended healthcare entitlements to employees on unpaid leave and introduced a subsidized student loan for adult education. The package also included wage support, but only for part-time employees and for 70% of the time they work less now. Two symbolic measures taken were the one-time HUF 500 thousand (ca. EUR 1400) extra pay for every healthcare worker and the announcement of the future reintroduction of the so-called “13th month pension,” which was abolished after the 2008 financial crisis. In total, the two packages amounted to 18–22% of GDP, and they were financed from budgetary reallocation and moderate deficit spending (the deficit target increases from 1% to 2.7%).¹⁰⁶

On the other hand, the crisis has been used as an excuse to implement several discretionary economic measures as well, targeting certain economic or political actors. These measures can be categorized into two groups. In the first group, there are measures which are levied to deprive actors of resources, such as the already mentioned parties and local governments, but also banks, multinational retail chains, and universities. While the government argues these measures are for “burden sharing,” the revenue they generate is negligible in comparison to the size of the packages: parties pay HUF 1.2 billion, the local governments 34 billion, retail chains 36 billion, and banks 55 billion (ca. EUR 3.4 million, 97.4 million, 103 million, and 157.3 million, respectively).¹⁰⁷ The restrictions for universities are also below HUF 10 billion (ca. EUR 28.3 million).¹⁰⁸ Thus, these withdrawals were less about generating revenues and more about political penalization. Indeed, these monies might not be

important for the state budget, but they are substantial for those who are compelled to pay. This is true for parties and local governments (see above) as well as for the other sectors and institutions, which had also been subject to special taxes and austerity measures earlier.¹⁰⁹

The second group of discretionary measures involved acts of predation, that is, takeover of property (rights), moving them to the ownership orbit of the regime, or more precisely Orbán’s single-pyramid patronal network. The Hungarian regime had exhibited a predatory nature long before the crisis¹¹⁰ but, as mentioned above, it can now carry out its activities at a more accelerated pace using the extra powers granted by the Coronavirus Act. The typology developed by Bálint Magyar for earlier predatory practices of the Hungarian regime is applicable here as well:¹¹¹

- *competency nationalization*, i.e., central appropriation of municipal responsibilities. On April 18, the government issued a decree that enabled it to designate “special economic zones.” This means that areas which (1) the government has declared a priority investment; (2) have a total cost requirement of at least HUF 100 billion (ca. EUR 282 million); (3) have a significant impact on the economy of the county as a whole; and/or (4) are needed to avoid massive job losses or implement new investment or expansion may be taken over from local governments, meaning regulation and taxation competences can be nationalized and centralized to the Fidesz-dominated county governments. Until May 4, competency nationalization took place only in the already mentioned case of Göd and the Samsung factory, which comprises 20% of the city’s territory and one-third of its budget. Investigative journalists found that the Samsung factory may have been chosen by the regime to allow further development by bypassing the local government,¹¹² which is confirmed by the fact that the government ordered HUF 43 billion (ca. EUR 118.5 million)

106 Gergely Csiki, “Itt az Orbán-kormány teljes koronavírus-mentőcsomagja [Here is the whole COVID package of the Orbán government],” *Portfolio.hu*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20200417/itt-az-orban-kormany-teljes-koronavirus-mentocsmagja-bovult-a-lista-426566>.

107 “Különadókat vezet be a kormány, 1345 milliárd forint jut gazdaságvédelemre [The government introduces special taxes, 1345 billion forints are spent on protection of the economy],” *Index.hu*, April 4, 2020

108 Babos Attila, “Milliárdokat von el a kormány az egyetemektől, a PTE állami támogatása 3,6 milliárddal csökken [The government takes billions from universities, the state subsidy of PTE decreases by 3.6 billion],” *Szabad Pécs*, April 26, 2020, <https://szabadpecs.hu/2020/04/virusvalsag-milliardokat-von-el-a-kormany-az-egyetemektol-a-pte-allami-tamogatasa-36-milliarddal-csokken/>.

109 Károly Attila Soós, “Tributes Paid through Special Taxes: Populism and the Displacement of ‘Aliens,’” in *Twenty-Five Sides of a Post-Communist Mafia State*, ed. Bálint Magyar and Júlia Vásárhelyi (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2017), 259–78; Mihály Andor, “Restoring Servility in the Educational Policy,” in *Twenty-Five Sides of a Post-Communist Mafia State*, ed. Bálint Magyar and Júlia Vásárhelyi (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2017), 528–58.

110 Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar, “Post-Communist Predation: Modelling Reiderstvo Practices in Contemporary Predatory States,” *Public Choice*, (January 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-019-00772-7>.

111 Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State*, 195–201.

112 Dezső András and Előd Fruzsina, “Pénz? Bosszú? Más oka lehet, hogy elvették Gödöt a Samsungot [Money? Revenge? There may be another reason for taking Samsung from Göd],” *Index.hu*, April 22, 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/22/god_samsung_politika/.

development support five days after it was taken over.¹¹³

- ordinary or re-nationalization with the possible aim of transit-nationalization. In the first step, the government—a few days after ordering the state of emergency—identified 140 “vital” companies that provide “critical infrastructure,” and ordered sending military groups to the companies to take over control “if necessary.”¹¹⁴ The government did not make clear why certain companies were selected and at which point they would be taken over, but reserved discretion to bring the company under total state control at any time it sees fit. The presence of soldiers and the practically limitless rights they have¹¹⁵ also provide opportunity for intelligence acquisition about the company, which is a crucial element in the stalking phase of predation.¹¹⁶ The second step is the nationalization of the company, as happened in the case of Kartonpack which is a publicly traded box manufacturer with Hungarian and foreign investors in the city of Debrecen. While the government did not explain why this company was taken over and how the takeover was related to the epidemic, the state was enabled by decree to decide on nonemergency related cases as well, instead of the company’s general meeting.¹¹⁷ The appointed commissioner has the right to terminate contracts and replace the leadership at any time—the latter happened immediately after the company was taken over.¹¹⁸ The third, potential step would mean that not only was the sending of soldiers to the companies a prelude to nationalization but

the takeover itself was a prelude to a targeted re-privatization of the companies by clients in the patronal network. In this case, the steps fit into the process of transit-nationalization or taking the company into “temporary state care”, through a series of slower and more complex steps, as in previous predatory cases in Hungary.¹¹⁹ This implies that actions taken on the pretext of the epidemic may have property consequences beyond the duration of the state of emergency. Such outcomes have been anticipated, in the context of the crisis and other governmental measures, by economic journalists¹²⁰ and consultants to foreign companies¹²¹ as well.

EU, PROPAGANDA, AND THE PEOPLE

Hungary has a special place among autocratic regimes as it is also a member of the European Union. Every EU country developed its own way to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, which is probably related to the inability of the EU to create joint action plans due to the vetoes of member states like Hungary and Poland.¹²² However, the EU took several measures to facilitate the crisis management of members states, some of which have been used by Hungary, though others have not. An example of the former was the decision of the EU’s finance ministers to temporarily lift the 3% limit of the Stability and Growth Pact to expand economic room for maneuver. As mentioned above, Hungary has kept its deficit under 3% even under the pandemic, which has been a subject of criticism from Hungarian economists who have urged a stronger fiscal stimulus and social economic program.¹²³ On the

113 Sándor Czinkóczi, “Miután a Kormány Elvette a Gödi Önkormányzattól a Samsung-Gyár Területét, Milliárdokat Önt a Területre [After the Government Took the Samsung Factory from Göd Local Government, Pours Billions to the Area],” 444.hu, April 23, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/23/miutan-a-kormany-elvette-a-godi-onkormanyzattol-a-samsung-gyar-teruletet-milliardokat-ont-a-teruletre>.

114 “140 cég irányítását veheti át a honvédelem, ha szükséges [The military can take over the control of 140 companies, if necessary],” Index.hu, March 17, 2020, https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/17/140_ceg_iranyitasat_veheti_at_a_honvedelem_ha_szukseges/.

115 Szalai Balázs, “Mi ez, hogy a katonák bemennek cégekhez? [Soldiers go to companies? What is this?],” Index.hu, March 20, 2020, https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/20/cegek_atveszik_iranyitas_katonak_honvedseg/.

116 Stanislav Markus, *Property, Predation, and Protection: Piranha Capitalism in Russia and Ukraine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 58.

117 Gergely Brückner, “Furcsa veszélyhelyzeti intézkedések: mire játszik az állam? [Strange emergency measures: what is the aim of the state?],” Index.hu, April 18, 2020, https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/18/mire_jatszik_az_allam_-_furcsa-veszelyhelyzeti_intezkedesek/.

118 “Állami felügyelet alá került a Kartonpack, le is cserélték gyorsan a vezetőket [Kartonpack is under state control, leadership was quickly replaced],” Index.hu, April 18, 2020, https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/18/koronavirus_magyarorszagon_kartonpack_kormanybiztos_igazgatotanacs_csere/.

119 Cf. Éva Várhegyi, “The Banks of the Mafia State,” in *Twenty-Five Sides of a Post-Communist Mafia State*, ed. Bálint Magyar and Júlia Vársárhelyi (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2017), 295–309.

120 Zoltán Jandó, “Kormányközeli Cégek Lehetnek a Nyertesei a Koronavírus Követő Felvásárlásoknak [Companies near the Government May Be the Winners of Post-COVID Acquisitions],” G7.hu, April 6, 2020, <https://g7.hu/vallalat/20200406/kormanykozeli-cegek-lehetnek-a-nyertesei-a-koronavirus-koveto-felvasarlasoknak/>.

121 Péter Magyar, “Orbán Újabb Cégekét Próbálhat Megkaparintani - Erre Figyelmeztetik Tanácsadók a Nyugati Vállalatvezetőket [Orbán May Attempt to Take over New Companies, Consultants to Western CEOs Warn],” 444.hu, April 1, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/01/orban-ujabb-cegeket-probalhat-megkaparintani-erre-figyelmeztetik-tanacsadok-a-nyugati-vallalatvezeteket>.

122 Cf. Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, “Hungary’s Mafia State Fights for Impunity,” Project Syndicate (blog), June 18, 2019, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hungary-mafia-state-viktor-orban-impunity-by-balint-magyar-and-balint-madlovics-2019-06>.

123 “Fifteen Hungarian Economists Speak out about Orbán’s Stimulus Package,” Hungarian Spectrum (blog), April 10, 2020, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/04/10/fifteen-hungarian-economists-speak-out-about-orbans-stimulus-package/>.

other hand, the EU initiated transfers of billions of euros to member and partner states. In the case of Hungary, the total investment related to released liquidity is EUR 5.603 billion.¹²⁴ As this sum does not come from a new fund but comes from that, member states will not have to reimburse the unused amounts that have been taken from regional or cohesion funds, and so government media and politicians have communicated that Hungary “receives no extra money from the EU.”¹²⁵

Issues like responsibility for the pandemic or the origin of the virus have not been at the forefront of communication from the Orbán regime. Instead, propaganda has a domestic focus and uses the above-described narrative of populist nationalism, framing the government as tireless and outstanding in fighting the crisis, and everyone else as having either a neutral or negative effect on the government’s efforts. In reaction to EU criticisms of the Coronavirus Act, Orbán said that “EU fuss-makers” should not “preach about various legal, though exciting, theoretical issues. Because now there is a crisis, there is an epidemic, we need to save lives, and only afterwards will we discuss what needs to be discussed. And if they can’t help, because they can’t, then at least don’t obstruct the Hungarians in defending themselves.”¹²⁶ He made the same response when 13 members of the EPP, the party group of which Fidesz is a member in the European Parliament, called for the expulsion of the party due to violations of EU norms with the Act.¹²⁷ On May 4, Orbán published another open letter to the leaders of EPP parties, speaking about “unfounded, coordinated attacks against us” and a “disinformation campaign.” He added that “Unfortunately, not only our formal political opponents but also some EPP politicians have been actively involved in the dissemination of fake news.”¹²⁸ Secretary of State and international spokesman of the government,

124 “European Coordinated Response on Coronavirus: Q&A,” European Commission, accessed May 9, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_458.

125 “Stúdióban kapott össze Deutsch és Ujhelyi az uniós pénzeket [Deutsch and Ujhelyi Fought over EU Monies in the Studio],” interview by Egon Rónai, ATV, April 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8mrokZlHzY>.

126 “Orbán Megüzente Az EU-s Kekeckedőknek, Hogy Most Ne Okoskodjanak [Orbán Says EU Critics Not to Preach],” 444.hu, March 27, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/03/27/orban-meguzente-az-eu-s-kekeckedoknek-hogy-most-ne-okoskodjanak>.

127 “Coronavirus & Expulsion: Orbán Sends Letter to EPP,” Hungary Today, April 3, 2020, <https://hungarytoday.hu/coronavirus-expulsion-orban-sends-letter-to-epp/>.

128 “Orbán: Ez volt a legaljasabb és legcinikusabb támadás [Orbán: This was the Most Nefarious and Cynical Attack],” Index.hu, May 4, 2020, https://index.hu/kulfold/2020/05/04/orban_viktor_level_epp_neppart/.

Zoltán Kovács has also made several such replies to foreign criticism of Hungary.¹²⁹ In a leading government daily, a journalist opined that the EU exercises a form of the “Brezhnev doctrine” which “mercilessly retaliates against any deviation from the official line,” and the reason for this is that “the globalist far-left considers every nation-state that is successful dangerous.”¹³⁰

Government media has portrayed Hungarian crisis management as one of the most successful in the EU, while other countries often fail to take adequate measures.¹³¹ Yet, in spite of the government campaigns, opinion polls show that the Hungarian population holds diverse views. On May 3, the parastatal pollster Nézőpont reported that 76% of the population was “completely” or “rather” satisfied with the government measures.¹³² Among more critical institutes, Publicus Institute found that over 90% of Budapest-dwellers supported the mandatory wearing of masks but 75% believed there was a need for much more expansive diagnostic testing (the ratio is 42% among Fidesz voters).¹³³ According to the IDEA Institute, 58% of the population opined in March that healthcare did not receive enough support,¹³⁴ and Závecz Research found that, in April, 59% and 69% believed that protective equipment was not available in time for healthcare workers and the population, respectively. Závecz Research also examined the change of party preferences: from March to April, the support for the government among certain voters grew by 3–4 percentage points, to 53%. It is followed by left-liberal opposition party Democratic Coalition (DK) which has 15% support among certain voters, and the left-wing Hungarian Socialist Party and the (former extreme-) right-wing Jobbik

129 “Zoltan Kovacs (@zoltanspox) / Twitter,” Twitter, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zoltanspox>.

130 Dávid Megyeri, “Brezsnyev-doktrína Brüsszelből [Brezhnev Doctrine from Brussels],” Magyar Nemzet, April 16, 2020, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/velemen/bresznyev-doktrina-brusszelbol-8007923/>.

131 “Magyarország Kezelte Az Egyik Leghatékonyabban a Járványt Az EU-Ban [Hungary Was One of the Most Efficient in Crisis Management in the EU],” Origo.hu, April 28, 2020, <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20200428-magyarorszagkezelte-az-egyik-leghatekonyabban-a-jarvanyt-az-euban.html>.

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133 “Budapest: maszk, tesztelés, és politikai arcélek [Budapest: mask, testing, and political image],” Publicus Intézet (blog), May 4, 2020, <https://publicus.hu/blog/budapest-maszk-teszteles-es-politikai-arcelek/>.

134 “A Magyarok 58%-a Százaléka Szerint Az Egészségügy Nem Kap Elégséges Támogatást [58% of Hungarians Say Healthcare Does Not Receive Enough Support],” IDEA Intézet, March 26, 2020, <http://www.ideaintezet.hu/hu/hirek-aktualis/34/a-magyarok-58--a-szazaleka-szerint-az-egeszsegugy-nem-kap-elegseges-tamogatast>.

which have 9–9% support.¹³⁵

Finally, the Hungarian population generally complied with the ordered confinement restrictions. In the first weeks of the lockdown, only 700 people were fined for breaking the restrictions,¹³⁶ and government representatives also found that the contact number between people in some cities dropped by 70–90%.¹³⁷ Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Report for Hungary shows a 42% drop in mobility trends for retail and recreation, accompanied by a 35% drop for transit stations and a 26% drop in workplaces.¹³⁸ These data start on March 21 (i.e., already before the lockdown), which suggests that Hungarians started to self-isolate already before the lockdown. This is further suggested by the fact that the Hungarian form of the hashtag #stayathome, #maradjotthon, started trending in social media two weeks before the lockdown was announced. People started using the hashtag in large numbers on March 11 (after the state of emergency was announced), it reached its peak on April 7, and it was used with decreasing intensity until May 4. In the last three months, the hashtag has mostly appeared on Facebook, with 83.52% of all shares. On the social media site, there have been 107,082 shares, 713,955 reactions, and 79,961 comments on posts using the Hungarian stay-at-home hashtag.¹³⁹

CONCLUSION

In sum, it can be said that, after some initial confusion, the Orbán regime managed to solidify its position, and found ways to use the crisis to its own advantage. Crisis exploitation is not particular to autocracies but can also happen under democratic conditions if there is a predominant view that the crisis had exogenous causes, and the government cogently and proactively communicates its crisis frames.¹⁴⁰ However, in the case of Hungary autocratic features like political patronalization, the government-dominated media landscape, and unlimited access to state resources enhanced the ability of PM Viktor Orbán to capitalize on the pandemic. In terms of action, mitigating the crisis appeared as an extra motive beyond the two basic drivers of the Hungarian regime: concentration of political power and accumulation of wealth for Orbán's single-pyramid patronal network.¹⁴¹ Yet the basic motives have not disappeared either, and several measures that nominally are against the crisis also serve either or both of those fundamental goals.

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136 "Kijárási korlátozás: eddig 15 millió forint bírságot szabott ki a rendőrség [Lockdown: the police fined for 15 million forints in total]," Népszava, April 8, 2020, https://nepszava.hu/3073873_kijarasi_korlatozas-eddig-15-millio-forint-birsagot-szabott-ki-a-rendorseg.

137 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

138 Google. "Hungary - Mobility Changes," COVID-19 Community Mobility Report, May 2, 2020, https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-05-02_HU_Mobility_Report_en.pdf.

139 Data collected by SentiOne. I am grateful to Miklós Szabó for collecting the data for this chapter.

140 Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, and Allan McConnell, "Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests," *Journal of European Public Policy* 16, no. 1 (2009): 81–106.

141 For further discussion, see Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes: A Conceptual Framework* (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, Forthcoming).