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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Translated Name of the Party	Original Name of the Party	Acronym
United Kingdom		
United Kingdom Independence Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	UKIP
Brexit Party	Brexit Party	Brexit Party
Spain		
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE
People's Party	Partido Popular	PP
VOX	VOX	VOX
United We Can	Unidas Podemos	PP
Citizens	Ciudadanos	C's
Italy		
Go Italy	Forza Italia	FI
Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI
League	Lega	Lega
Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Democratic Party	Partito Democratico	PD
France		
National Rally	Rassemblement National	RN
Indomitable France	La France Insoumise	LFI
The Republic on the Move	La République en Marche	LREM
MODEM	MODEM	MODEM
Democrats and Independants' Union	Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	UDI
Socialist Party	Parti Socialiste	PS
Greens	Les Verts	EELV
The Republicans	Les Républicains	LR
Germany		
Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD
Federal Minister of Health	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit	BMG
Christian Democratic Union	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	CDU
Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	CSU
Liberal Democratic Party	Freie Demokratische Partei	F.D.P.
Green Party	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne
The Left Party	Die Linke	Linke
Robert Koch Institute	Robert Koch Institut	RKI
Social Democratic Party	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD
Hungary		
Fidesz	Fidesz	Fidesz
Christian Democratic People's Party	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	KDNP
Hungarian Socialist Party	Magyar Szocialista Párt	MSZP
For a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Jobbik
Democratic Coalition	Demokratikus Koalíció	DK
Another Politics Is Possible	Lehet Más a Politika	LMP
Momentum	Momentum	Momentum
Dialogue	Párbeszéd	P
Czech Republic		
ANO 2011	ANO 2011	ANO
Freedom and Direct Democracy	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	KSČM
Poland		
Law and Justice	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	Konfederacja 'Wolność i Niepodległość'	Confederation
Civic Platform	Platforma Obywatelska	PO
Polish People's Party	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	PSL
Democratic Left Alliance	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	SLD

CHAPTER 7
HUNGARY:
CRISIS AS USUAL - POPULIST GOVERNANCE AND THE PANDEMIC

Abstract

Populists in Hungary had to manage the crisis from government position. Orbán has shown strong leadership during the crisis and dominated the political context of the issue. However, the usual elements of the 'populist myth' characterizing Orbán's and Fidesz's ordinary communication were adopted to interpret and frame the COVID-19 crisis. Within this narrative, the leader and its people together fight for 'the Hungarians' national interests and freedom against the interconnected international and national enemies who seriously threat these interests and freedom for their own political and economic benefits. The pro-government political and media actors' communication were characterized by strong people-centrism, criticism towards the EU and the international 'liberal mainstream' including NGOs and media, and polarizing narratives that presented opposition actors as serving foreign political interests. As a reversed form of politicization, any criticism coming from social or political actors were immediately labelled as 'political'

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Introduction

Hungary is a special case in the European Union: since 2010 the country is governed by the populist right-wing party coalition of Fidesz and the Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (Fidesz and Christian Democratic People's Party, KDNP – hereafter referred to as Fidesz since the KDNP plays only a subordinated role). The governance of Fidesz has been long characterized by markedly populist elements like majoritarianism, anti-pluralism and illiberal tendencies, polarizing politics, strong leadership, and a direct communication with the electorate (Bartha *et al.*, 2020). Fidesz has been very active in communication and constant campaigning, conveying a 'populist myth' (Körösényi *et al.*, 2020): the construction of the 'hard-working Hungarian people' coupled with criticism towards the EU, anti-immigration discourse, and adversarial narratives concerning unpopular minorities (LMBTQ people, Gipsies). The pandemic has not brought about substantially new development in this respect: Fidesz simply adapted its communication patterns and political logic to the circumstances. Migrants have been blamed for the pandemic and the EU for inadequate policies; polarizing narratives have kept being echoed about the political opposition; and the government has made controversial decisions in order to weaken the opposition parties and municipalities governed by them. Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has shown strong leadership and health policy measures have been symbolically militarized. However, at the same time the government has not been hostile to medical expertise and the imposed precautionary measures have effectively contained the spread of the disease.

1. Political context

Since 2010 Hungary has been governed by Fidesz, a right-wing party and its unquestioned leader, Orbán who has been serving as Prime Minister. Since 2010 Fidesz has won three parliamentary elections with a constitutional majority (two-third of the seats) due to four main reasons. First, in 2010 the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt – MSZP), the leading force of the left, collapsed under corruption charges and the heavy consequences of the 2007-2009 economic crisis. MSZP split under the crisis and in 2010 two new parties, the radical right-wing Jobbik (Jobbik Magyarországért – For a Better Hungary) and the green LMP (Lehet Más a Politika – Another Politics is Possible) also formed groups in the parliament. Since then the fragmented and poorly organized opposition could not propose a convincing political alternative to the rule of Fidesz. Second, the past

decade brought about a fast-economic recovery coupled with an increasing inflow of EU-money to Hungary. This has created a favourable economic situation in the country and growing prosperity to large segments of the society. Third, Fidesz has used its comfortable parliamentary majority not only to initiate a series of radical policy changes, but also to alter the system of institutional checks and balances and create illiberal reforms that strengthen its power position. Fidesz unilaterally passed a new constitution and changed the electoral system to its own advantage. Fourth, although the government has not been engaged in 'macroeconomic populism' (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990) and has pursued a rather responsible, or even neoliberal fiscal policy (cutting spending on social benefits, health care, and education) it has managed through a series of well-targeted policy measures and active communication to create legitimacy for its decisions. For instance, the slogan of 'workfare society' legitimised the cutting of unemployment benefits and the introduction of the compulsory public works programme for the unemployed as well as the tying of family support schemes to legal (taxable) income. This policy package has an implicit anti-Gipsy message (Bartha *et al.*, 2020).

Originally a moderate conservative party, in the past decade Fidesz has been gradually radicalizing both in terms of policy positions and communication patterns. Today it has an uncompromising anti-immigration stance, upholds the traditional family model, questions the rights of LMBTQ people, and conveys anti-EU messages sometimes rooted in blatant conspiracy theories. Although Fidesz is member of the European People's Party group in the European Parliament, its membership was suspended as during the 2019 European Parliamentary election campaign the party used posters on which Jean-Claude Juncker, then the president of the European Commission, was portrayed with Hungarian-American billionaire and philanthropist George Soros with the caption: '*You have the right to know what Brussels is up to!*'. Fidesz spends huge amounts on communication and uses various channels. The public broadcasting has become a propaganda channel for the government where politicians of the opposition have practically no chance to be invited to. Through businesspersons close to the government Fidesz controls most of the commercial radio stations, many daily and weekly newspapers and the overwhelming majority of public billboards (Polyák, 2019). That is, Hungarian media is characterized by an extreme form of parallelism, with little overlap between the thematization of the pro-governmental and the independent media universes. Besides its active media policy, the government regularly organizes so-called National Consultations in which the citizens are asked about current political issues. However, the results of the National Consultations are not transparent and accountable and the whole institutions is more about conveying manipulative messages than to gather inputs from the people (Batory & Svensson, 2019).

While in 2010 Jobbik, a radical right-wing party was its main rival, Fidesz has managed to take over the messages of Jobbik on law and order measures, compulsory public works for the unemployed, cultural war against the liberal elite, extreme nationalism, and hostility towards immigration. Today Jobbik, seriously weakened, seems to be more moderate, more liberal and pro-European than Fidesz. Fidesz, while dominating the legislation, has been also the strongest party at the local level. At the municipal elections of both 2010 and 2014 it was by far the most successful party gaining majority in all regional councils, winning all (but one: Szeged) of the major cities, including Budapest, the capital city. However, the 2019 municipal elections brought about a breakthrough of the coalition of opposition parties. Although Fidesz remained the most popular party it was defeated in half of the major cities. Budapest elected Gergely Karácsony, the candidate of the opposition for mayor and the coalition of opposition parties won in most of the districts in the capital city. The key of the success of the opposition was to overcome its fragmentation and create a coalition for the elections. In Hungary it meant the cooperation of the left-wing, liberal, green and right-wing opposition parties of the opposition. At the local level some other actors, like civil organizations and other, smaller parties have also joined in. It is obvious that these coalitions are extremely fragile and their political survival is far from being evident. Nevertheless, the municipal elections of November 2019 put a dent into the myth of invincibility of Orbán and Fidesz. It is a major political change since 2010 and provides an important element of the political context at the time of pandemic.

It is also important that the critiques of health care policy are one of the main topics of the opposition since 2010. They often emphasize that the government neglect health care system which is thereby in terrible state. Over the last ten years, several anti-government demonstration and campaign have been organized to protest against the government's health care policy. Polls also often show that people perceive the state of health care system as the most important problem the country faces[34].

Table 7.1 Main Hungarian political parties (>5% in the last general election)

Political party	2018 general election		2019 European election	
	Vote shares∗	Seats	Vote shares	Seats
In power				
Fidesz – KDNP	49,6%	133	52,6%	13
In opposition				
Jobbik	19,2%	26	6,3%	1
MSZP – PM	13%	20	6,6%	1
DK	5,4%	9	16%	4
LMP	7,1%	8		
Momentum	-	-	9,9%	2

∗The Hungarian system consists of a combination of individual mandates and party lists. The vote share data refer to the latter.

2. COVID-19 diffusion and political measures

As in many other European countries, the government reacted early to the news about the pandemic and set up on January 31 the so-called Operational Group. This government body has been responsible for monitoring the epidemiological situation, coordinating the measures taken as a response to the pandemic and providing the public with the necessary information. The Operational Group held lengthy daily press conferences televised real time – however, since the middle of March journalists could not ask questions on the spot, they had to send in their questions beforehand by e-mail. The Operational Group did not answer all questions and especially independent journalists and media outlets have been complaining about no response to their queries.

The first cases of COVID-19 were identified in March. As a response, on March 11 2020, the government declared the state of emergency. From this time on the government issued a series of emergency decrees, in which it partially suspended the application of certain acts as well as enacted new regulations. Arrivals from Italy, China, South Korea and Iran were banned, just like indoor events involving more than 100 and outdoor events involving more than 500 participants. On March 13th the prime minister announced the closure of all kinds of educational institutions. Three days later further restrictive measures were announced by Orbán: the borders of Hungary were closed, so that only Hungarian citizens were allowed to enter the country; all public and social events were banned. From March 27th physical movement of citizens was restricted too.

On March 30th the parliament passed the Coronavirus Act (labelled as Authorization Act) which permitted to the government to rule by decrees without any functional or time limitation, without any debate in the legislation, and without any guarantee for immediate constitutional review. The Act stirred heavy criticisms from both internal and international actors as a potentially damaging move for democracy. MPs of the European Parliament raised concerns about the Act and warned about the rule of law. However, 2.5 month later, on June 16th the parliament called back the Coronavirus Act and the government triumphed over its critics, arguing that people who had accused the government of dictatorship were calumniators. But the same day the parliament also voted for a previously unknown legal order, the so-called 'health crisis situation' in which upon the declaration of the Surgeon General the government acquires special powers again.
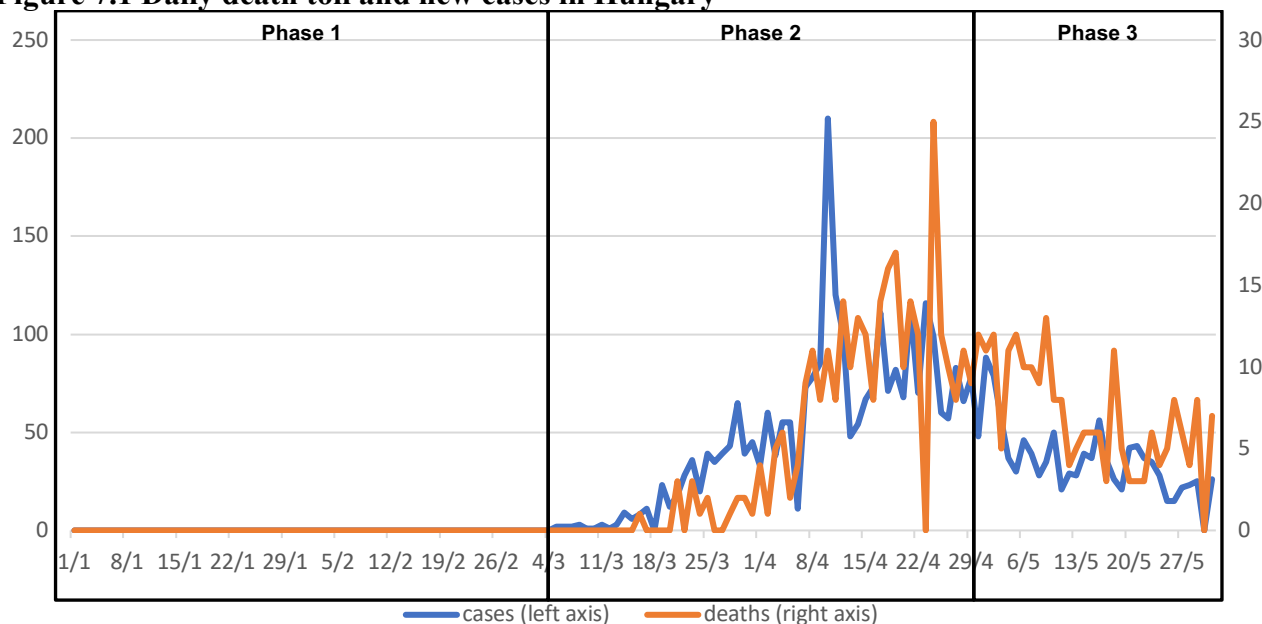
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[34] E.g. Standard Eurobarometer 92, November 2019, Hungarian country report.

From the beginning of April to mid-May Hungary was experiencing the speeding up of local transmission. One of the most significant measures in this period was the ordering of public hospitals to free up 60% of their capacity, equalling 36 thousand beds. On April 7 there were around 800 known cases so the capacity made available largely exceeded the foreseeable need, while rumours were spreading about the dramatic fate of the patients that had been forced to go home. Then and since the political opposition has made several attempts to criticize the hasty decision, but failed to provide convincing evidences about the consequences to the public. From the end of April the government started to selectively lift lockdown measures, and finally ending the emergency situation on June 16. Overall Hungary has managed to contain the spread of the disease fairly effectively and the number of both known COVID cases and COVID-related deaths have remained relatively low (see Figure 7.1 and Table 7.2).

As part of the emergency measures the government introduced a series of decisions aimed at alleviating the economic hardship. These included tax exemptions for small businesses and individual entrepreneurs, the acceleration of VAT refunds to improve the solvency of small and medium size enterprises, and the extension of taxation related deadlines. On the other hand, in order to generate additional revenues new surtaxes on credit institutions and the retail sector were introduced, transfers to municipalities and the state subsidies of political parties were curtailed.

While the government started a communication campaign already during the lockdown advertising the governmental measures and their supposed effectiveness the opposition has argued that Hungary, unlike most of the European countries, fell short of providing large-scale subsidies to businesses for the preservation of workplaces and that several targeted financial aids went directly to businesspeople close to the government.

Figure 7.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Hungary

Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
Phase 1: pre-Covid-19; Phase 2: spread and containment measures; Phase 3: contagion mitigation

Table 7.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary

Cases	4,027
Total deaths	551
Total recovered	2,355
Cases for 1 M pop	417
Deaths for 1 M pop	57

3. Populist discourse at the time of COVID-19

During the pandemic the same populist arguments and frames appeared in the communication of the governmental politicians than in normal periods therefore the dominant discourse has changed little. As Körösényi, Illés and Gyulai (2020) argued there is an overarching narrative behind the communication of the Orbán-regime, the so-called 'populist myth' (Casullo, 2020), whose main elements are applied to interpret any major political issue and crisis. The central narrative of this populist myth is that the leader and its people together fight for 'the Hungarians' national interests and freedom against the interconnected international and national enemies who seriously threat these interests and freedom for their own political and economic benefits. This 'populist myth' makes charismatic leadership possible as it creates a charismatic bond between the leader and its followers and maintain the leader's capacity to act in a highly flexible way (Körösényi *et al.*, 2020: 59-61). Orbán's charismatic leadership was a central feature of the Hungarian crisis management (see, Merkovity *et al.*, 2020), and the commonly used elements of this 'populist myth' pervaded the government communication of the crisis. In the construction and dissemination of this discourse, the government communication could also draw upon the centrally organized extensive pro-government media network that uncritically produced and echoed the elements of this narrative.

The 'people' were a constant reference point to the government's, and especially Orbán's communication. During the crisis, people were usually referred as 'Hungarians' as an inclusive but homogenizing label which is a commonly used concept to describe the objects of the political representation in the Orbán-regime. The main official slogans of the crisis communication were '*No Hungarian is alone'* and '*every Hungarian is responsible for every Hungarian',* and Viktor Orbán often discussed and analysed the attributes, behaviour, efforts and performance of the 'Hungarians'. In these talks, Orbán always painted a very favourable picture about 'Hungarians' and describe them as highly disciplined, intelligent, brave, helpful and sympathetic. He also frequently talked about the everyday difficulties 'Hungarians' face during the pandemic in a sympathizing and mundane way showing he knows very well these ordinary problems. For instance, in an interview he told: '(…) *I know exactly that staying home with two or three children (...) is the jihad in itself*'[35]. Beyond these references another way to involve 'the people' into the crisis management was that pro-government think tanks published a lot of polls during the crisis, and their results have become a constant reference point in the pro-government media public to show that 'the people' highly support the governments' measures. To present this support more clearly, in July the government launched a National Consultation where citizens can express their opinion about the crisis management through directed and carefully selected questions. As discussed before, the main function of these National Consultation is to justify popular support for the government's measures, and show that the government acts in line with the people's will. The questionnaire included questions about what measures the government should do in the future (e.g. free internet for teachers, strengthen the protection of elderly home), but there were items about George Soros ('*Do you reject George Soros's plan, which would put our homeland in debt for an unforeseeably long period of time?*'), immigration, '*hostile foreign acquisition*' of companies by '*international financial speculators*' and Brussels' '*offensive against the immigration-related regulations of the Hungarian constitution*' as closely related issues to the pandemic.[36]

In line with the central narrative of the 'populist myth', the relationship between the incumbent elite and 'the people' is not presented as conflicting, instead their organic unity and cooperation are emphasized. Orbán often stressed that an effective crisis management requires proper collaboration

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[35] Radio Kossuth, 04/17/2020

[36] see, About Hungary: Here is the latest national consultation questionnaire in English http://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/heres-the-latest-national-consultation-questionnaire-in-english/

between the incumbent elite and 'the people'. At the same time, strong elite criticism is an important part of the crisis communication, but as a usual element of the prevailing discourse, this is directed to the global, especially the European elites. The major sphere of this anti-elitist rhetoric is the strong international and national critiques of the Coronavirus Act enacted at the end of March. As a response of concerns expressed by international and national actors, the government and its allied media argued that the liberal mainstream including the European political elites, international media outlets, NGOs and their affiliated national allies such as the opposition and the left-liberal media attacked the country and its government who put its all efforts to defend the nation from the pandemic. This attack is politically motivated as this liberal mainstream aims at overthrowing the government and therefore want to make the crisis management to be unsuccessful. They also highlight that these international and national actors are all connected by being supported by George Soros, the Hungarian-American billionaire, the main enemy of the government. Soros was also accused of using the crisis for his own economic interests with his idea about the perpetual bonds European Union should use to finance the recovery. Orbán referred to this idea as Soros-plan 2.0 which aims at making European Union to be 'debt slavery'. A further recurring claim was in the pro-government media public that the sharp fall in the value of the Hungarian forint in the first weeks of the pandemic was due to Soros's speculative intervention motivated by his own political and economic interests. European political elites were also highly criticized by pro-government actors for their inefficiency in crisis management. They often argued that Western European countries and the European Union failed in protecting their citizens which was usually contrasted with the Hungarian and Central-Eastern European crisis management presented as highly successful. Overall, these arguments are recurring elements of the dominant pro-government discourse in Hungary, the construction of the politically motivated, interconnected and inefficient European elites is a major ingredient of the 'populist myth' discussed by Körösényi and his colleagues (2020).

At least since 2015 the outgroup in the image of 'immigrants' is also an inherent part of this narrative. However, during the pandemic this element was dominant only in the first weeks of the crisis, later its presence was rather marginal. At this first phase, pro-government actors, including Orbán, often argued that there is a clear link between the pandemic and immigration, and for these reasons the defence of the borders and the rigid immigration policy are crucial to protect 'the Hungarians'. This narrative was amplified by the fact that the first infected cases were students from Iran who were reported to aggressively confront to the protective measures in the hospital and violate quarantine rules. This incident received heightened attention in the pro-government media sphere, and the Operational Group being responsible for the daily information service also intensively reported about it. A few days later the government expelled these students from the country. Later less words were devoted to immigrants by pro-government actors, and though the argument about the link between the pandemic and immigration did not disappear entirely, the topic became marginal in the crisis communication. The Chinese origin of the crisis was not problematized in the government's discourse. Instead, China appeared as a supportive ally who is the main provider of protective equipment owing to the great commercial relationships built up previously by the government.

4. The politicization of COVID-19 issue by populists

Given the fact that populists in Hungary are in governmental position, and the Coronavirus Act gave them even stronger authority, they could easily and immediately enact any idea. In fact, pro-government actors often highlighted that they were able to make and implement the most important decisions much sooner than other countries that is the main reason of the effective crisis management. They also stressed that this effective decision-making was made possible by the highly criticized Coronavirus Act which allowed the PM to manage the crisis personally. In the managing phase, Orbán stated that the Coronavirus Act was his best decision over the last ten years. As the Act is shown as the main force of the successful crisis management, its previous opponents could be easily

presented retrospectively as who seriously endangered the effective protection of the people during the pandemic.

However, during the emergence phase the topic of COVID-19 received less attention by pro-government actors. Although preventing measures such as setting up the Operational Group and the acceptance of an Action Plan were made at the end of January, the Prime Minister kept distance from the topic until the middle of March. As a sign of the depoliticized approach, the issue was managed by lower level policy makers indicating that the government considered it to be a policy rather than political question. For instance, at the end of February, Orbán missed his usual speech in the opening day of the spring session of the parliament to give the floor to the Minister of Human Resources to talk about the COVID-19 situation, while he told in an interview that '*although the coronavirus is attracting now all the attention, the historical challenge we face is still the migration itself*'[37]. In this period, it was only the opposition that tried to politicize the topic by emphasizing that the health care system is not well-prepared for the pandemic which attempts were highly criticized by pro-government politicians and media actors who often accused the opposition politicians and media outlets of overstating the challenge and making panic.

Since the virus appeared in Hungary, this approach has suddenly changed, and the PM has become the clear leader of the crisis management both in the government's communication and the pro-governmental media (see, Merkovity *et al.*, 2020). While this change indicates that the government no longer considered the topic as a pure policy question that should be managed by politicians being responsible for the specific area, their main argument was that the crisis management cannot have a politics aspect. Governmental political actors argued that the crisis management is exclusively about protecting people from the medical and economic consequences of the pandemic, and any politics-related interpretation or claim is invalid and harmful from this respect. According to them the effective crisis management requires national unity and to set aside any political rivalry. This approach is also stressed by comparing the situation to war time and describing it war-like metaphors. However, as a reversed form of politicization, this problem-solving approach was attributed only to the government, and any critique of their measures made by the opposition, professional associations such as the Hungarian Medical Chamber or teachers' union, NGOs, experts or media outlets was labelled as politically motivated attack, and pro-government politicians usually highlight their alleged underlying political motives. While this strategy appeared in several issues related to the crisis management, it was the most prominent in case of the national and international controversy about the Coronavirus Act. The pro-government politicians and media actors argued that this law is the most important tool for the effective defence and its exclusive purpose is to make this possible. Its opponents including the international and national political actors, media and NGOs attack it only because they want to make the crisis management unsuccessful as this could result in the fall of the government. To sum up, the 'naming' appeared in a reversed way as the main argument was that while the government manages the crisis as it is without any political motivation, its opponents make strong efforts to politicize the issue in line with their power interests.

The pro-government actors often stressed that their crisis management strongly relied on the opinions of scientists and experts. Orbán also claimed that he is not too familiar with the topic therefore he needs to consult with scientists frequently to make reasonable decisions, and on his Facebook page he often showed segments from his meetings with experts. However, he also made it clear that expert opinions are unable to substitute political decisions, and drew a definite line between the expert and political knowledge. He argued that expert opinions cannot guide political measures directly as political decisions are more based on the 'common sense' that he owns. Expert opinions serve only as a crucial factual background for these 'common sense'-based political decisions. However, it is also important to note that while Orbán and other pro-government actors often referred to the importance of embracing scientists' knowledge and opinions, these experts were hardly visible in front of the public. The official faces of the information service beyond the Surgeon General of

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[37] Rádió Kossuth, 02/28/2020

Hungary were from policing bodies therefore people in uniforms were a determining visual feature of the official crisis communication.

In the phase of confrontation, blaming played an important role in the communication of the government. While the government kept highlighting the efficiency of their measures, for the existing problems the newly elected oppositional mayor of the capital city, Karácsony, was mostly blamed. The main object of these critiques was the fact that an elderly care home run by the municipality of Budapest has become the primarily node of the Hungarian pandemic. Pro-government actors and media outlets made Karácsony personally responsible for this incident and argued that his passive and ineffective political leadership and crisis management led to this tragic event. Orbán also strongly blamed the mayor, criticizing sharply his personal leadership quality and abilities, and mentioned that after the crisis his responsibility would be examined in legal way. Naturally, Karácsony kept refusing his personal responsibility for this incident, instead he argued that some government measures and the lack of proper information-services lead to these infections. Further, it is important to note that Karácsony was already under attack before this incident as his several measures were highly criticized by pro-government actors. Another repeatedly blamed actor was the European Union that was presented as passive, ineffective and unhelpful in the crisis management while highly active in political-motivated attacks against the government. As an evidence for the inefficacy of the European Union, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) were often highlighted since it predicted the risk of the pandemic to be moderate in its reports until the middle of February which allegedly set back the effective country-level protections.

5. Conclusion

Hungary is a case of populist governance since 2010. Fidesz and its leader, Viktor Orbán, have been using populist political strategy and populist communication patterns for the past decade or more. This blend of strong leadership, illiberal measures, direct communication with the electorate as well as the construction of the 'populist myth' of the strong community of Hungarians versus hostile liberal elites and their protégés, the immigrants was simply adapted to the circumstances of the pandemic. While the government hold that the effective containment of the disease is a national challenge that should not be politicized, any criticism coming from social or political actors were immediately labelled as 'political'. However, a small, but important detail is that Orbán, unlike other populist leaders like Bolsonaro or Trump, never questioned the importance of expert knowledge. At the same time his relationship to expertise has been somewhat ambiguous: medical experts have not been pushed in the forefront of communication with the public and Orbán made clear several times that decisions have to be made by politicians who ultimately rely on their instinct and the common sense.

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