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How Orban's decade in power changed Hungary

His 'cultural era' is transforming society, but life can be precarious for those who are not part of this worldview

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Four days after Viktor Orban won a third consecutive term as prime minister in 2018, Zsolt Szekeres was drinking his morning coffee when he saw a newspaper article about 200 individuals considered enemies of the Hungarian people.

Szekeres was accustomed to his employer being criticised by the government-friendly press. He works for a human rights NGO supported by the billionaire Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros, a regular target of attacks by Orban's Fidesz party. But the article in Figyelő, a pro-Orban weekly magazine, went a step further. Under the headline "The Speculator's People", a reference to those it believed to be controlled by Soros, the publication singled out certain individuals by name. And Szekeres was one of them.

"Crazy things started popping into my mind… Now it was me personally listed among those who should be treated as enemies of the state? How far is it going to go?" recalls Szekeres during a recent socially distanced interview in Budapest's leafy city park. "I felt a very big psychological burden that it wasn't just about the organisation any more but it was about me personally and that every aspect of my personal life was in danger."

In the past three years, the Hungarian government has increased the pressure on those that don't conform to its worldview: it has forced a flagship university – founded by Soros – to with-draw from the country, demanded that international NGOs register as foreign agents, constitutionally banned homelessness and moved to exert closer control over Hungary's theatres. That was before the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic, during which the parliament handed Orban the right to rule by decree indefinitely – a move it said was vital to combat the disease.

Zsolt Szekeres, who has worked on asylum cases for the Hungarian Helsinki Committee since 2016, is concerned that society is fraying as a result of the government's approach to migrants © Bálint Bárdi

As Orban marks a decade in power this month, Hungary is a country much changed from the one he took charge of in 2010. Then, it was in the throes of painful austerity measures and nearly three-quarters of the population said they'd been better off under communism. Less than half felt the transition to capitalism had been the right path. In the years before Orban's decisive victory, uniformed far-right militias held regular marches across Hungary, alarming citizens who thought the country's accession to the EU in 2004 would bring greater security.

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Zsolt Szekeres

Orban promised stability. He is now the longest-serving leader in the EU after German chancellor Angela Merkel. Hungary has enjoyed one of the highest rates of economic growth in the EU and unemployment has plummeted (prior to the pandemic). However, metrics for rule of law and press freedom have sunk so much that the independent watchdog Freedom House no longer considers the country a democracy. With each successive term, Orban has attempted to bring the highest-level courts to heel and increased control over the media.

The changes of the past decade have laid the groundwork for an even more far-reaching legacy that will transform society at the roots and may outlast both Orban and his political system. Dramatic change has taken place at all levels of education, in research and cultural institutions and in the economic system. “They want to take over all aspects of Hungarian life, and I think they have gone pretty far,” says Andras Biro-Nagy, the director of Policy Solutions, an independent Budapest think-tank that is often critical of the government.

According to Szekeres, uncomfortable facts can be dismissed as exaggerations penned by the “opposition” press. Last summer, as the government continued a policy of refusing to provide food for adult migrants whose asylum claims had been rejected, one of his relatives, an Orban supporter, told him of their scepticism that what the media reported was true. Szekeres was shocked. “I was telling them, ‘I am personally working on these cases. This is happening.’” After 10 years of “constant propaganda”, he says, it was easy for his government-supporting family members to ignore reports that did not fit their own perspective.

Shortly before Hungary’s communist regime collapsed in 1989, a group of students and recent graduates founded the Alliance of Young Democrats, known as Fidesz. One of its leaders was Viktor Orban, who earned national recognition for a brave speech in June 1989 urging the Soviet troops still present in the country to go home. Among those impressed was George Soros, who was happy to see democracy take root in his home country and who sponsored the young Orban’s scholarship to Oxford University’s Pembroke College.

Supporters of the Fidesz party celebrate the swearing in of Orban as prime minister in Budapest on May 29 2010. Orban is now the longest-serving leader in the EU after German chancellor Angela Merkel © AFP via Getty Images

Less than a decade on in 1998, Orban became Hungary's prime minister. But his failure to be re-elected four years later deeply wounded him. In *The Second Term of Viktor Orban*, conservative thinker John O'Sullivan writes that Orban believed his failure occurred because "most of the institutions of society, privatised industry and media in particular, were in post-communist hands".

In 2006, with this in mind, people close to Orban started to found their own institutions. These included the now government-funded Nezopont Institute, which conducts polling and policy research – one recent study was of prominent intellectuals and journalists deemed to be receiving funds from Soros. After Orban's return to power, a government-funded think-tank called the Center for Fundamental Rights was created in 2013. According to its website: "The Center considers preserving national identity, sovereignty and Christian social traditions as its mission".

In an agenda-setting speech in July 2018, the premier went further, laying out his ambition for "a cultural era" that would transcend politics. "An era is a spiritual order, a kind of prevailing mood, perhaps even taste – a form of attitude. A political system is usually determined by rules and political decisions. An era, however, is… determined by cultural trends, collective beliefs and social customs."

Before his return to power, Orban told a group of supporters: "We only have to win once, but then properly." So in his second and third terms, he rewrote the constitution and election laws and instituted his unorthodox brand of "Orbanomics", featuring the lowest corporate taxes and the highest VAT rates in Europe.

The same month that Orban set out his plan for a "cultural era", Hungary's kindergarten curriculum was amended to promote a "national identity, Christian cultural values, patriotism, attachment to homeland and family". Shortly thereafter, the government withdrew financing and support for university gender studies programmes, and announced an effective takeover of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the country's premier research institution.

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Andras Biro-Nagy, director of Budapest think-tank Policy Solutions

Creating enemies and vilifying opponents is part of the strategy. "The biggest lesson in this decade regarding everyday life is that life can change from one moment to another, which is not typical in a stable democracy where rule of law prevails," says Peter Kreko, the director of Political Capital, a Budapest-based think-tank. "You can lose your job [due to political reasons]. Universities can be pushed out from one moment to another. Orban's policy and politics is not conservative. This is about a permanent illiberal revolution."

One institution unlikely to come under threat is the controversial House of Terror. The museum, which opened in 2002 during Orban's first term, is part of his attempt to tailor the country's historical narratives. This extends from ancient history (a new institute is devoted to explaining the ethnic origin story of Hungarians) to more contemporary issues, including a Holocaust museum project that initially faced claims of minimising the role Hungarians played in the atrocities.

Marton Bekes, research director of the House of Terror museum, which opened during Orban's first term. 'We don't yet have cultural hegemony, so we have to keep winning elections' © Bálint Bárdi

The line to visit the House of Terror usually snakes down Budapest's Andrassy boulevard and around the corner: before its recent closure during the pandemic, tourists often waited up to an hour to enter. The research director is Marton Bekes, a 37-year-old who also edits Kommentar, a journal that can often be seen on Orban's desk during video addresses. Bekes shares the prime minister's view that if you own culture, you can "do a whole era". "You can lose elections – it is better if you don't – but even if you do, cultural hegemony is yours," he says.

Outside the House of Terror stands an exhibit erected last year in celebration of the 30th anniversary of the collapse of communism. It shows Orban and his Fidesz party as central to the Hungarian freedom struggle and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Bekes is hopeful that Orban will be in charge of Hungary for "tens of more years". "This cultural work is a long march," he concludes. "But we don't yet have cultural hegemony, so we have to keep winning elections."

To do that, Orban will need to continue to attract voters. Since 2010, approximately one million ethnic Hungarians living outside the country's borders have become citizens. More than 90 per cent of them vote for Fidesz in elections. The premier is also playing the long demographic game of trying to improve the country's birth rates.

In February 2019, he announced that women who bear four or more children would be exempt from income tax. In a "state of the nation" speech that linked the policy to his stance on migration, he said that Hungarians "are still an endangered species", adding: "We need to build a country in which those making the commitment to have children are financially better off than if they had chosen not to have children."

Eszter Lerch-Fulop and her husband Balazs spent four years trying to have a child before she finally became pregnant with twins through in vitro fertilisation at a private clinic. The couple, who live in a quiet lakeside town near Hungary's border with Austria, have selected names for the boy and girl due in June, painted their nursery and taken parenting courses. "It was an amazing feeling when the embryo was successfully implanted," she says.

Eszter Lerch-Fulop, 23 weeks pregnant, in her house in Fertod. Orban's policy of providing loans, subsidies and tax breaks to families with children has proved popular © Bálint Bárdi

The 32-year-old paid for her treatment in a private clinic last year, but many more women will now be able to access it for free – as part of the government's radical new fertility programme, which includes the nationalisation of IVF clinics. The Lerch-Fulops chose to spend €1,500 because Eszter did not want to wait several months to receive government-subsidised assistance. However, she and her husband are planning to apply for an interest-free loan worth 10m Forints (€30,000) available to newlyweds who want to buy a house.

For now, they are not applying to a newer loan programme, open to heterosexual couples where the woman is younger than 40 and at least one spouse has never been previously married. When the couple has two children, 30 per cent of the principal debt will be cancelled. If three are born, the entire amount is forgiven. Lerch-Fulop says that while she hopes to have a third child, she doesn't want to be under extra financial pressure.

The family policy is among Orban's most popular initiatives according to a recent poll conducted by the Policy Solutions think-tank. Two-thirds see providing loans, subsidies and tax breaks to families with children as the government's greatest achievement of the past decade. Supporters say his concept of "demographic governance" has borne fruit. According to Katalin Novak, state secretary for family and youth affairs, the number of marriages last year was higher than in the previous four decades, and divorces the lowest in 60 years. The fertility rate, she said, had grown by 20 per cent since Orban took over, though according to government projections, the country's population of 9.8 million could still shrink to 8.3 million by 2050 in a worst-case scenario.

Hungary was one of the first countries to institute a family policy, including a family allowance, before the second world war. However, critics say the current measures heavily favour middle-class and upper-middle-class families, while sending a negative message to non-traditional couples. Some also question whether the nationalisation of the clinics will help boost the Hungarian birth rate. Gabriella Lantos, a former director of a private hospital that provides IVF treatment which was not nationalised, views the government policy as a marketing campaign. She believes "there is an ideological line above this reality… because the real effect [in terms of boosting the birth rate] is nothing."

As Orban seeks to remake society, those on the margins are in an increasingly perilous position. Since 2016, Zsolt Szekeres has worked on asylum cases for the Hungarian Helsinki Committee. The NGO's clients include children in the country's "transit zone", a collection of repurposed shipping containers along the southern border with Serbia where those who have ongoing asylum procedures must wait. Last week, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that the practice constituted unlawful detention. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee has represented more than 30 clients there who have been no longer supplied with food after their asylum claims have been rejected.

A police officer patrols the Hungarian-Serbian border near Roszke, April 2017 © Getty

Since the height of Europe's refugee crisis in 2015, Orban has positioned himself as an opponent to Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel, who declared her country could manage an influx of almost one million refugees and migrants from Middle Eastern nations such as Syria and Iraq. His domestic popularity, which had been waning, ballooned, and his government papered the country with billboards – ostensibly targeting migrants but written in Hungarian – including: "If you come to Hungary, you must not take jobs away from Hungarians!"

The anti-migrant campaign accused NGOs, such as the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, of taking orders from George Soros. According to the investigative outlet Atlatszo, in 2017, the Hungarian government spent €40m as part of a massive media campaign to discredit Soros, Orban's one-time champion, and the liberal worldview he stands for. It also sent a questionnaire to every household soliciting thoughts on the "Soros plan" to flood the country with migrants. The government has consistently denied that the campaign against Soros is anti-Semitic.

Szekeres acknowledges that the messages resonated with the majority of Hungarians – in 2015, some 87 per cent of voters supported Orban's approach to migrants. But he believes that society has frayed as a result. "When you are exposed to years of wilful, targeted hate propaganda, when you train people to be receptive to it, even when they have sympathy for individual stories, they will still buy your message, if it's about generalised masses that they don't know," he says.

For Szekeres, the idea is reminiscent of the pact that the late communist leader Janos Kadar made with the Hungarian people: "If you mind your own business and let us conduct the affairs of the state as we see fit, you will be fine… the others, who aren't like you somehow, aren't fit or worthy of the same rights or protection as you are because they are free-riders, cherry-pickers, they don't fit into what we think is the right way of a human being to exist," Szekeres says, referencing targeted campaigns against migrants and minorities. "And that's really, really disturbing."

Hungary's parliament recently handed Orban the right to rule by decree during the coronavirus pandemic (he indicated last week that he may relinquish this by early June). Critics have accused him of deploying his new rights to mount an unprecedented power grab and target opposition politicians ahead of general elections in 2022. Kreko says that even if the opposition manages to win a simple majority then, it would be very difficult to govern because the economy is controlled by businessmen close to Orban. "If you just gain a simple majority, will it be enough for anything?".

Yet some believe the pandemic could also spell trouble for Orban. In the Policy Solutions poll completed just before the coronavirus outbreak, almost 60 per cent of respondents, including nearly half of pro-government voters, said the healthcare system had worsened in the past decade. Only 30 per cent, the core Fidesz voters, said they thought Hungary was better off now than 10 years ago, despite the fact that it has been one of the EU's fastest growing economies in recent years.

For Biro-Nagy, this combination of healthcare and inequality, displays "the weakest points" of the government, and presents an urgent challenge to a prime minister who "has never had to face an economic crisis". Szekeres believes that Orban's actions over the past 10 years have also acted as a wake-up call for many. "When fundamental rights are threatened, it can have the effect of firing up people and showing them that certain things are actually important and we have to stand up for them."

Still, he says, overcoming the cumulative effect of Orban's rule on Hungarian society will be difficult. "What will remain is this mindset that you are not responsible for anyone but yourself and your smaller, nuclear family... that you don't really have to care that there are second-class citizens, and that the different social groups within society should be kept apart and not care for each other. Any law can be overturned, policies reversed, but these ideas cannot be undone overnight."

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