

POLITICAL REPORT ON COVID: HUNGARY

1 - THE SITUATION BEFORE COVID

Healthcare was underfunded, nurses and doctors were brain-drained by the west, remaining nurses were working 12 hour shifts five times a week.

Before the FIDESZ Orbán, the government policy of the social-liberal comprador government was preparing for privatization and promotion of the idea of privatization. Orbán rose to power amid widespread resistance against this process, as well as against the utility services profiteering off the hungarian masses amidst the economic crisis of 2008-2009, with promises that outmaneuvered the so far ruling "social-liberal" "left" coalition from the left.

However, despite the successful renationalization (of utility, and even reversing the pilot privatization of Eger hospital) and keeping healthcare a state service, Orbán was still the representative and servile gubernator of large capital, and has kept the waiting lists long, and the hospitals under-equipped and under-staffed, providing a market for private healthcare providers amongst those who can pay but don't want to or can't wait.

After this turn of events, the social-liberal left turned coat, arguably supporting more funding for the state healthcare and the salaries of doctors and nurses, but on the other hand they had been consistently hijacking and co-opting anything they could towards their primary goal of replacing Orbán in the government.

As a result, Fidesz was in a good position to cast criticism as politically charged smear, hindering any possible progress, while they made only the smallest, minimal steps to maintain order. One such a step was the shortening of waiting lists by not allowing anyone to be made to wait for over three months while on the list, which meant that most people ended up on an unofficial waiting list, masking the issue. The author is one such case.

It was in this embattled and strained state that Covid-19 hit Hungary.

2 - GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE COVID

- GOVERNMENT ASSESSMENT OF COVID RISK

Initially, when covid first appeared in the country through iranian students, (4th of march) the hungarian government was wary and sceptical of the severity of the virus. However, upon strong consultation with leaders of hospitals, most importantly of the South-Pest hospital and the leading doctors of Semmelweis (Medical) University, it was made clear that the hungarian healthcare system could not handle an uncontrolled outbreak. That would have led to a massive prestige loss, which was of course politically unacceptable, so epidemic controlling measures were to take place.

- GOVERNMENT MEASURES TAKEN FOR FIGHTING COVID (SANITARY)

Initially, the government supported the "more common" blanket measures such as disallowing large events, border checks, automatic quarantines for those coming home from affected countries, temporary suspension of

student exchange programs, and the cancellation of almost all events for the national holiday of March 15th. However, the more pressing matters, such as those of schools, restaurants, full border closure, and actual restrictions on going out, were not supported overwhelmingly, and it took debating to close the schools, actually close the borders, only allow restaurants to stay open until hour 15, etc.

The shutdown, that is where restrictions were placed on people to only go out for important reasons, happened on March 27th.

These were later loosened in May and June respectively, signaling the end of the first wave in hungary.

In August when the second wave of covid was proving inevitable, similar but looser measures, focusing on mask wearing instead of staying at home, were enacted, even in light of much higher infection counts. These restrictions were gradually increased, first from not accepting scarfs and handkerchiefs as valid mask-replacements(Date?), then restrictions on night clubs and other partygoing places, then full-blown evening lockdowns and complete mask mandate on the streets in november, including the closure of most social spaces (Library, Cinema, Museum, Swimming pool, Zoo, Skating Rinks, and even the Christmas events).

Much of the lax attitude was because at that point, vaccines were on the horizon. Sputnik V was already registered, and also western and chinese manufacturers were racing to put their wares on the market. However, due to conflict with the EU, which, on the level of office statements advised member countries against doing their own vaccine procurement outside the EU central one, the local production of Sputnik V, which our russian partners were in approval of and willing to cooperate on,

was not realized, and this was exacerbated at the end of year and the start of 2021 when the EU central procurement that politically focused on the Pfizer-Biontech one, and so far refused Sputnik V, produced merely "a trickle" of doses.

Upon realizing that we can not rely on our "allies", the government sped up approval of the Sputnik V vaccine, which happened alongside AstraZeneca, the british development that ironically announced shortly after the approval that it'll produce less than the planned amounts.

- EFFECTIVITY OF THE MEASURES

The effectiveness of the timely first wave shutdowns can not be understated. By june the whole epidemic was under control, with sporadic cases popping up here and there. Death count was extremely low. Life resumed, mask mandate was minimal, only in shops and public transport, which wasn't even a governmental, but city council measure. This is in stark contrast with the second wave starting in August of 2020. The delays between successive and progressively increasing restrictions allowed the infections ample time to spread, and made reducing the case count after the inevitable and more severe shutdowns happened much more difficult.

Indeed after two and a half months of the curfew, both the daily cases are still high, and we have as many deaths every four days as we had in the first wave altogether. This was of course, a result of a bourgeois economical outlook on Covid-19 rather than a socialist one. The government gambled on the swift arrival of the vaccine, and intended to keep as much of the economy going as possible for a potential swift recovery advantage over neighbouring countries once the coast is clear.

3 - POLITICAL SITUATION

- EFFECT OF THE COVID PANDEMIC ON THE POLITICS (THE EU, GOVERNMENT)

However, according to the Hungarian Social Forum, much of that gamble was bungled by trying to balance between not stepping too hard on the toes of the EU pressuring the government on other fronts as well (next 7 years budget plan/rule of law), and the official claims that Hungary would procure whatever vaccine is available, and deemed safe by our own regulators.

HSF also called for local production, which was offered only from the east, by the russian vaccine developer so far, which can't even meet the russian domestic demand. The western developers, Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca all have limited production capacity and an "unique business politic" meaning they don't license either and try to make the maximum profit from the pandemic. In particular Moderna deprioritized shipments to the EU, thanks to the Brexit and the british government ordering it to focus on domestic vaccination.

At home comprador pro-west liberal opposition and it's media lackeys have been keen on using every opportunity to discredit the government and install itself in it's place, to funnel state funds into the pockets of it's own benefactors, loyal functionaries and economic backyard. It also used the tired russophobia and sinophobia to stir up discontent with false rumors and claims.

Meanwhile the government was playing the aforementioned "balancing act", between appeasing western capitalists and furthering the interest of national ones, while preventing unrest.

The Hungarian Worker's Party, although stripped of much of it's opportunities to popularize it's views and agitate on the streets, has been ongoing and generally supporting and demanding genuine and not two faced policies, decrying loopholes, and demanding whatever saved the most lives and what would give us earliest, mass access to vaccination.

In january of 2021, it has become clear that the western "allies" are not going to deliver on even their most meager offering, and as expected, both the russian Sputnik V, and the chinese Sinopharm vaccines were given regulatory approval, followed by purchase in large quantities.

- MAPPING OF THE POST-COVID POLITICAL SITUATION

Post-covid hungary's politics will be likely dominated by the heightened struggle between proponents of a more centralized EU with less national sovereignty, and proponents of a looser aggregation of stronger nation states, each gambling on getting a larger slice of the EU's imperial plunder pie.

Let's not forget that the EU is at it's core an imperialist institution, where western european and nordic countries still actively participate in the exploitation of the third world, and demands expansion to and cannibalization of new and new markets and resources.

Also worth keeping in mind is the intentionally maintained inequality between the EU's core and periphery, a sort of "internal imperialism" that relegates acceded countries like Romania and Hungary to the role of cheap manual labor and a training ground for cheap specialists such as medics.

Since the hungarian accession to EU was predicated in

no small part on the promise of free travel, which is only enjoyed by the infinitesimal minority of the population (the labour aristocracy and bourgeois), and the working off our backwardness and reaching the prosperity of the EU core (reaching the paygrades of germans and french and swedes), that we still haven't made a single centimeter of progress is by design of the EU rather than any failure on our part.

I'd like to mention that here liberal economists would spout their utter garbage that it is because – *and they can say it with a straight face* – "we are not productive enough". Others would be much closer to the truth, and point out that we only do the cheap manual labor part of the production chain, with the smallest "added value", leaving us with the smallest fraction of the production pie. They still leave it out that the foreign capital did this, and it was not out of "natural" processes that can be reversed with a bit more "rational thinking". Yet even they spout other empty platitudes that still make it look like it's our own fault.

At any rate both kinds of economic views failed to address the fundamental problem, the reduced living standards since the 2008-9 economic crisis and permanent peripheral, second class status. Not yet *hominidae*, but not fully human either! The Orbán government's small concessions helped tide this over, but it is also running into the limit of how much it can hand out, how much it can convince the bourgeoisie, national or foreign, to compromise, to give out of their own pockets, before the contradictions become irreconcilable.

As the result of this struggle, Anti-EU sentiments and discontent are rising, and accordingly, the governing capitalist parties made a silent agreement on tightening the conditions for entering the parliament, further reducing small parties' chances and moving us closer to

an american-style two-party dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

4- GOVERNMENT ECONOMICAL RESPONSE TO THE COVID

- IN THE EU

In the closing months of 2020, an argument over the next seven years of the EU cohesive funds and budget were between east and west. The western faction of the EU intended to tie to the budget a vague requirement about rule of law, which could have been abused against dissenting peripheral countries, giving more power to the core over the periphery. Eventually a compromise was reached, but the struggle for the pie slices continues.

- ECONOMICAL RESPONSE IN DIFFERENT SECTORS

Within Hungary, the first wave had seen some concessions for everyone. Maximization of annual interest rate for consumption loans, reduced taxes in tourism, hospitality, and entertainment, cost of social security (a monthly payment for full healthcare access) reduced to its lawful minimum and tax exemption for KATA (small) entrepreneurs. On the other hand while payment of loans was suspended, and their monthly pay would be fixed on the next year, they would accumulate interest in 2020, lengthening the total time those loans would take to repay.

Beyond those, much economical attention was aimed at keeping workplaces going. As an example there was in November, a compensation for already booked hotel stays that were canceled due to the restrictions, but only to hotels that did not lay off workers.

More importantly, investment and the keeping of jobs

was supported in Hungary with the government bearing one quarter of the cost of expanding or modernizing production. This meant that for every three units of investment, the government added an unit of its own. Furthermore, employment was not only kept but increased amongst the disabled in the state sector.

- EFFECTIVITY

Every measure and its effectiveness, including the statistics, is the subject of intense squabbling to this day. According to the Central Statistics Office, employment was kept, but also the number of people seeking employment (unemployed but also registered in search of a job) increased too.

Perhaps more telling, according to the Hungarian Worker's Party, the inflation of prices took away much of the crumbs given by the government. Food prices of all increased, including staple foods such as bread and poultry.

Even worse, the minimal pension was kept at the criminally low rate of 28500 HUF, less than 80 euros a month, with no practical increase in sight. In 2021 the minimum salary growth was agreed at a criminally low 4% rate, half the growth as it was in the January of 2020.

5- CONCLUSION

- RESULT OF THIS SITUATION

As expected, a crisis further eroded the foundations of the house that is the capitalist system. A house can only be renovated so much before it is necessary to replace it. Vietnam, Laos, and China have shown that a socialist system, putting the people's lives ahead of profits, can not only fight a pandemic more effectively, but also

rebuild economically much faster than the capitalist competition.

The crisis further eroded the foundations of the imperialist franco-german pact known as the EU. As predicted, the national bourgeoisie of the eastern periphery demanded a larger slice of the pie, and kept threatening the EU core's leaders with secession, and a permanent realignment to Moscow and Beijing, should the demands not be met. This, in light of the finally concluded Brexit, threatens the very survival of the EU project itself.

While the conflict over the covid relief funds, and such have subsided or been postponed, the hungarian approval of two eastern vaccines, despite the objections of the EU ruling bodies and pro-western sellouts, has shown this not be an idle threat.

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