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HUNGARY

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Introduction

The inauguration in 2010 of an illiberal and, in several respects, far-right regime has attracted considerable interest and consternation. Yet renewed attention to the extremity of Hungarian politics typically focuses on the regime of Viktor Orbán and obscures both the historical development that elevated it and the right-wing extremist social forces that comfortably coexist with it.

This chapter illuminates several important features in the case of Hungary. First, the resurgence of right-wing extremism after the transition from socialism was bolstered by a deep well of discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes among the Hungarian populace, as well as by economic grievances that abounded in the 1990s. Attitudinal disposition remains an important explanatory factor for the successes of Hungary's far-right. Second, Hungary's post-socialist politics are marked by a steady ascendancy of far-right social forces. Though specific actors rose and fell and changed their ideological position, some moderating and others radicalising, the rise of the Hungarian far-right has mostly been consistent: from re-emergence of far-right organisations in the 1990s to political ascendancy in the late 2000s, and finally to the present phase where far-right actors control state and governmental power. And third, an important condition and outcome of this development is that Hungarian state actors have no impactful counter-extremism strategy. Laws and policies meant to curtail extremism, though enacted, are judicially interpreted with a tolerant regard for the far-right and seldom applied by law enforcement agencies. What is more, since 2010 the illiberal regime has both fostered the far-right in the public sphere and hindered the efforts of civil society actors to implement counter-extremism projects and programmes.

The chapter consists of three parts. The first summarises a few important points of historical context and elaborates the attitudinal trends among Hungary's citizenry that help to identify the base of support for far-right actors. The second part distinguishes the three phases of development for the far-right in Hungary's post-socialist politics. In particular, we trace the (often complementary) evolution of radical and extreme right forces – but underscoring the fuzzy real-world distinction between these forces. The third part focuses on counter-extremism action in Hungary, and why it has so evidently failed.

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Historical context of Hungary's far-right

The establishment of the modern Hungarian nation-state is in many ways a story of assimilation: incorporating a multi-ethnic population into the Hungarian Kingdom, part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Though itself at times suppressed and subject to imperial authority in Vienna, the authorities of the Hungarian Kingdom were also internal colonisers imposing Hungarian predominance in many spheres. A Hungarian identity emerged that represented simultaneously a coloniser's pretence of cultural superiority and a thrall's resentment for a history of subjugation and oppression. Feelings of superiority and inferiority together form core aspects of Hungarian national identity (Erős 2019).

The past century has deepened this stamp of identity, most especially through three climacterics. First, the end of the Great War spelled the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; with the 1920 Treaty of Trianon the country lost almost three-quarters of its size and saw significant numbers of ethnic Hungarians displaced outside the newly constricted borders of Hungary. Irredentist aspirations led the inter-war Hungarian regime to ally with Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, late in the war, March 1944, Wehrmacht forces occupied Hungary and installed a government of the Arrow Cross Party (*Nyilaskeresztes Párt*), a National Socialist party and arguably the progenitor of Hungary's modern far-right. Following the Second World War, Hungary found itself still subject to foreign domination by the Soviet Union. The socialist era lasted over four decades and reverberates through contemporary political culture. Taken together, historical factors in Hungary resound with grievance, stemming primarily from foreign domination as well as from interethnic conflict. A prevalence in Hungarian attitudes towards resentment of foreign influence and xenophobia partially reflect these historical factors.

Attitudes

Hungarian attitudes lean to the right. This fact emerges from a wide range of surveys – not to mention the evidence of elections. The World Value Survey (WVS) (Keller 2013) characterises Hungary as situated at the margins of Western Christian culture, a generally closed, inward-looking society. What is more, the WVS reveals low levels of social and institutional trust. Democratic institutions suffer from a conspicuous lack of trust, which accords with low support for democracy and civil society participation. At the same time, a quarter of the population favours authoritarian views and political rhetoric (Gimes et.al. 2009; Juhász et al. 2014). These features of Hungarian attitudes go some way towards explaining how right-wing extremists and their political messages can resonate with some segments of society.

Civic, inclusionary conceptions of Hungarian identity, essential for a democracy with a multi-ethnic population, clash with persistent ethno-national conceptions that are more amenable to far-right discourses. The historical factors that buttress Hungarian ethno-nationalism, chiefly past occupation and foreign domination, also favourably incline many to the contradictory melange of, on the one hand, heightened nationalism and, on the other, collective victimhood and scapegoating (Erős 2019). Far-right narratives that cast Hungarians as a great ethnic nation and implicitly or explicitly exclude minorities, their rights, and multiculturalism generally resonate among a significant proportion of the citizenry.

Two groups have a particularly long history of persecution in Hungary: Roma and Jews. During the socialist era, the state officially suppressed racism against the Roma and, similarly,

antisemitism did not manifest itself openly because it was considered a component of fascist ideology. Notwithstanding strong state control, in everyday interactions incidents of racism, hate speech, and other manifestations of interethnic hatred persisted. Enduring mechanisms of institutional racism, such as marking Roma ethnicity in school and criminal records, also remained in place (Dunajeva 2018). After a long historical period without free speech and free press, the new democratic system introduced both, and allowed the re-emergence of open racism and antisemitism.

The psychosocial aspects of prejudice against Roma and Jews, deeply rooted in Hungarian society, are equally and contrastingly premised on socio-economic and cultural factors. Most Roma belong to the lower socio-economic strata of society. This real material position goes hand-in-hand with conceptions of Roma as an underclass, outcasts, pariahs. And their disadvantaged and excluded position is often turned back on them: 'Roma are lazy; they depend on welfare while honest Hungarians work hard.' Such welfare chauvinism and vilification of Roma is common (Kende et.al. 2021). Jews, on the other hand, are conceived of as an upper class, connivers, manipulators. The longstanding image of Jews as obscenely wealthy and possessing socio-economic reigns of power has considerable purchase in Hungary. Across various indicators between one-quarter and one-third of Hungarian respondents express agreement with tropes of antisemitic prejudice: 'there is a secret Jewish conspiracy that determines political and economic processes' (36 per cent fully or partially agreed); 'the number of Jews in certain fields of employment should be restricted' (23 per cent fully or partially agreed); 'the Jews are more prone to using unethical means to achieve their goals than others' (30 per cent fully or partially agreed). Antisemitism in Hungary is rife and pervasive – and growing (Félix et.al. 2020).

Both anti-Roma racism and antisemitism stem from fears of losing socio-economic positions and of losing status. Such fears, typically more pronounced in less stable societies such as Hungary, where scars of the transition from socialism remain, make people more susceptible to discourses that blame other social groups. The widespread anti-Roma and antisemitic sentiment offers fertile ground for extremist actors as well as political actors using explicitly or implicitly racist messages to mobilise support (Munk 2007; Székelyi et al. 2001). Roma are cast as indolent and stupid idlers scrounging off state money; Jews are represented as the rich and powerful and influential, depriving Hungarians of food through conspiratorial machinations. These longstanding distortions remain potent among Hungarian society, and actors playing on them abound.

Added to antiziganism and antisemitism, new antipathies have arisen and indeed been wantonly stirred up in Hungary. Foremost among these new group-focused enmities (Zick et al. 2008) are anti-Muslim, anti-migrant, and anti-LGBTQ attitudes. Whereas radical right political parties, such as Jobbik, preserved and espoused antiziganistic and antisemitic discourses, under Fidesz and Viktor Orbán the government itself is the fountainhead of hate against migrant (sometimes also labelled as Muslim) and LGBTQ individuals.

To be sure, these new hostilities are not ginned up solely by political actors; in European comparison, Hungarians are among the most unaccepting towards foreigners (Bernát et al. 2013; Kende and Krekó 2020). Yet the pull of political opportunism is not hard to detect in recent swells of xenophobia and homophobia. Anti-immigrant and Islamophobic attitudes increased amid the refugee crisis in 2015 after the government launched a fierce anti-migrant campaign. Immigrants and Muslims, often used interchangeably, are cast as invasive foreigners whose culture, especially religious practice or heritage, is incompatible with Hungarian national identity (Vidra 2017). By the same token, the government has targeted LGBTQ individuals and communities in recent years with homophobic rhetoric but also

with legislation that confines homosexual rights and relegates them to second-class citizens. In large part, this surge of activity is part of a transnational counter-mobilisation against the 'Istanbul Convention' (officially, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence), which right-wing, conservative, and religious actors frequently lambaste as promoting 'gender ideology' (Krizsán and Roggeband 2021). The Hungarian government has not implemented the Istanbul Convention – though Hungary is a signatory – which means some protections for LGBTQ individuals enshrined in the Convention are not being instituted. Moreover, the government in 2021 passed an 'anti-LGBT propaganda' law (officially, the 'Amendments to the Child Protection Act, the Family Protection Act, the Act on Business Advertising Activity, the Media Act and the Public Education Act') resembling Russian legislation passed in 2013 that has been used to suppress LGBTQ activism and persecute individuals.

Taken together, the old and enduring prejudicial attitudes towards Roma and Jews and the new and wilfully incited hatred towards Muslims, migrants, and LGBTQ mean that radical and extremist right-wing actors have many areas in which their stridently exclusionary rhetoric, and sometimes violence, would be warmly received by a sizeable audience. As we explain in the following sections, extremist actors in the three phases of post-socialist Hungarian politics have used and further incited these attitudes.

The far-right in Hungary

Young democracy phase, 1990–2002, far-right re-emergence

A prerequisite for the re-emergence of far-right social forces was the lifting of socialist suppression. Fortunately for the far-right, freedoms of speech and assembly represented the most fundamental values of the new democratic regime; they simultaneously offered legitimation and served to delegitimise the old socialist regime (Szőcs 1998). Effectively countering resurgent far-right extremism would have meant to address the limits of these fundamental values. The democratic regime did not take up this task of nuance. No legislative measures were made at the outset to address far-right, and consequently extremist, actors who enjoyed much freedom to mobilise and campaign.

Next, to mobilise and campaign effectively Hungary's revived far-right needed a receptive audience. As described above, sizeable chunks of the population hold attitudes agreeable to far-right exclusionary nationalist discourses. Added to this, the regime change unleashed economic instability and hardships. The inclination of many towards far-right discourses and, bearing in mind that deprivation and threat perceptions reinforce far-right preferences (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012; Onraet, Van Hiel and Cornelis 2013), heightened socio-economic grievances benefited far-right actors.

Onto this scene of new freedoms and favourable grievances emerged a panoply of far-right political parties and militant and skinhead groups. The common distinction between radical and extremist actors is useful to differentiate Hungary's far-right during its early democratic period[1]: radical right-wing actors accept democracy but reject many of its *liberal* components, typically in favour of privileging (ethnic) majorities to the cost of minorities; extreme right-wing actors reject democratic precepts based on free elections.

The most significant radical right-wing actor was the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (*Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja*, MIÉP). It was founded in 1993 when István Csurka quit the then ruling moderate right-wing Hungarian Democratic Forum party after accusing its leader, Prime Minister József Antall, of being an agent of foreign interests. Under Csurka's

leadership MIÉP became the representation of folkish and strident nationalism, antisemitism, and anti-establishment postures. The party won national representation only once, in 1998, garnering a small share of seats from 5.5 per cent of the vote. Nevertheless, MIÉP played an important role in the regeneration of far-right electoral politics in Hungary.

The extreme right-wing scene consisted of a smattering of small neo-fascist or Neo-Nazi political parties and movement organisations. In the early 1990s a trio of organisations emerged: the World-National People's Power Party (*Világnemzeti Népuralmista Pártot*, VNP) led by Albert Szabó, the Hungarian National Front (*Magyar Nemzeti Arcvonal*, MNA) led by István Györkös, and the Association of Those Persecuted by Communism (*Kommunizmus Üldözötteinek Szövetsége*, KÜSZ). These organisations succeeded in mobilising a few hundred young skinheads for rallies espousing elements of Nazism or Szálasi's Hungarism. In 1994, they merged to form the Hungarian Hungarist Movement (*Magyar Hungarista Mozgalom*, MHM), but only existed for a matter of weeks before the Supreme Court imposed a statutory ban for their open antisemitism (Szőcs 1998). Yet this prohibition did not prevent Szabó from reorganising under a new entity, the Hungarian Welfare Association (*Magyar Népjóléti Szövetség*, MNSZ). While the impact of these extremist organisations at the time was minimal – though Szőcs's (ibid., p. 1103) speculation in 1998 that Szabó might 'qualify for the role of the Hungarian [Jean-Marie] Le Pen or [Gianfranco] Fin' attests to the potential ascribed to the extremist movement – they succeeded in re-mobilising right-wing extremist activists in Hungary.

In the early years of post-socialist Hungarian politics, far-right social forces re-emerged and formed organisational infrastructure. Though their factionalisation prevented them from becoming a major political force, they succeeded in raising old grievances, such as the idea of revising the Treaty of Trianon, and criticising growing socio-economic inequalities. Subsequent iterations of Hungary's organised far-right built on the foundations established in this period.

Left-liberal rise and fall phase, 2002–2010, far-right ascendancy

In the 2002 elections MIÉP also lost all its seats, leaving Hungary's far-right without any parliamentary representation. But ultimately of much greater importance was that a coalition led by the Hungarian Socialist Party came to power, supplanting the Fidesz government led by Viktor Orbán. It would be swept out of office in 2010, but not before triggering a new burst of far-right organising and activism, the effects of which endure now.

The first term of the Hungarian Socialist Party government was rather uneventful. The country continued in the direction of Western integration, having joined NATO in 1999 and acceding to the EU in 2004, but the government made no great strides. This torpor may not have posed a problem if not for a fateful leak. In 2006, shortly after being re-elected, the socialist prime minister delivered a speech in front of the inner circles of the party, notorious now as the *Öszödi beszéd* ('Öszöd speech'), in which he admitted that their victory was partly a result of the deception about the government's achievements, that in reality the government had done 'nothing for four years' and had 'lied morning, noon, and night' to get re-elected. The speech was leaked to the media and the resultant outrage led to weeks of violent street riots. Far-right actors were often organisers for the protests, but they were allegedly supported by Fidesz and other centre-right actors. (Szabó (2008) argues that the riots were 'postmodern,' with an eclectic array of participants with different motivations, objectives, etc.) The rioters demanded the prime minister's resignation, but to no avail. Still, the riots represented a political instability that provided an opportunity for the far-right to build

group cohesion and burnish its public reputation (Mikecz 2015) – both typical objectives of far-right demonstration politics (Virchow 2007; Zeller 2021).

Among the protesters and rioters, members and supporters of a young political party were prominently represented. A youth association oriented towards the folkish radical right ideology of MIÉP had been founded in 1999 and registered as a political party in 2003: Movement for a Better Hungary (*Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom*), or just 'Jobbik.' The second half of the 2000s witnessed the rise of this party from obscurity to notoriety as one of Europe's largest radical right parties.

Beyond the Öszöd speech scandal, two factors were key to the surge in far-right support (cf. Karácsony and Róna 2011; Varga 2014; Mareš and Havlík 2016). First, economic growth and socio-economic welfare stagnated in Hungary in the latter half of the 2000s – and then declined sharply with the onset of the Great Recession. The Hungarian government, thoroughly delegitimised by scandal, was scarcely able to cope with this economic pressure. Voter preferences reflected frustration with the government: between 2002 and 2009, anti-establishment sentiments among voters changed from 12 per cent to 46 per cent (Juhász et al. 2014). Second, tensions surrounding Hungary's Roma communities became a focus of public debate. A particular event helped to draw this focus: in 2006, in the village of Olaszliszka, a Hungarian man was murdered by a mob of Roma after the man had accidentally hit a Roma girl with his car. (The girl was not seriously injured.)

Jobbik used the case to draw public attention to what party figures called 'gypsy criminality.' The phrase denoted the supposed criminal tendencies of Roma people, depicted in Jobbik's narratives as born criminals and blameworthy for the country's social and economic hardships. Jobbik's stance emboldened a network of extreme right-wing actors with varyingly close connection to the party. The biggest of these groups was the Hungarian Guard Traditionalist and Cultural Association founded in 2007. The Hungarian Guard functioned as a sort of paramilitary group and organised marches through Roma communities, torchlit processions reminiscent of marches by Nazi brownshirts. During these demonstrations, Guard leaders and Jobbik representatives delivered anti-Roma hate speeches to phalanxes of uniformed members as well as the community members, the 'neighbours' of the local Roma people. Although the Guard was proscribed by court order in 2009 (Halasz 2009; Pirro 2018) a successor organisation (i.e., the 'Hungarian Guard Foundation') and other groups – such as the Outlaw Army, the Pax Hungarica Movement, the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement, and the Our Homeland Movement (see below) – continued to menace and attack Roma communities. Between 2008 and 2009 extreme-right militants committed a series of racist murders (Halasz 2009), killing six and injuring several more. After the perpetrators were caught, it was revealed during their trial that they had sought to retaliate against Roma crimes, echoing narratives about 'gypsy crime,' and that they had selected their attack locations based on where the Hungarian Guard had organised marches.

The extreme right was not the only sector stimulated by Jobbik's anti-Roma rhetoric. Important parts of the mainstream political elite, instead of rejecting Jobbik's racist narratives, adopted and reinforced this perspective. The concept of 'gypsy crime' was taken up and used by politicians and the media. Jobbik successfully radicalised the mainstream (Minkenberg 2017). Having won support with its anti-Roma campaign, Jobbik gained upwards of 14 per cent of the vote in both the 2009 European parliamentary elections and the 2010 national legislative elections, making it the third strongest party in Hungary.

At the end of the left-liberal phase of Hungary's post-socialist politics, the far-right was on the rise. Though the folkish radicalism of MIÉP had disappeared, the cultural infrastructure they established enabled a new generation of the radical right to build their movement

into a political force (Mikecz 2015). A rich subculture, organised on a network of websites and connected to 'national rock music,' provided reliable mobilising structures for Jobbik (Pirro and Róna 2019) and offered belonging and a sense of identity to a cohort of young people (Feischmidt and Pualy 2017).

Illiberal phase, 2010–present, far-right in power

Following the catastrophic second term of the Hungarian Socialist Party government, the 2010 elections swept Fidesz into power with a two-thirds majority. The decade since this climacteric witnessed the steady entrenchment of the Fidesz government, shearing away liberal protections in favour of Orbán's illiberal democracy. Simultaneously, the collapse of Hungary's political left-wing and concomitant swing of votes to Fidesz and Jobbik[2] generated a new political dynamic: competition for right-wing voters and marginalisation of the political left.

Whereas Hungary's left receded in 2010, Jobbik surged, signalling to Fidesz a new centre of political competition – on its right flank. Consequently, Fidesz has turned (more) towards far-right discourse, narratives, and indeed policies. Four areas are representative of this shift. First, Fidesz has instituted a new politics of memory, namely, memorialising the interwar authoritarian regime of Miklós Horthy, absolving Hungary of culpability for the Holocaust, and condemning the socialist regime. In the country's new basic law – passed in 2011 with the support of only the government's MPs – there are several historical allusions, one of the most important being the assertion that Hungary lost its sovereignty between 1944 and 1990, lumping together the Nazi and Soviet occupations and entirety of the socialist era, and implicitly denying any Hungarian culpability for the Holocaust. Perhaps the clearest symbols of this historical memory agenda have been erected by the government in concrete, steel, and bronze. The 'Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation' unveiled in central Budapest in 2014 evokes a victimised Hungary set upon by a German imperial eagle (Mikecz 2021); in 2019, a memorial to Imre Nagy, a liberal socialist leader killed by pro-Soviet forces in the aftermath of the failed 1956 revolution, was moved from Martyr's Square in Budapest in order to restore a monument from the Horthy era commemorating victims of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic; and since Fidesz came to power, monuments of Horthy have been installed in Kenderes (2012), Kereki (2012), Budapest (2013), Budapest (2017), Bodaszőlő (2018), Csókakő (2019), Hajdúbagos (2021), and Kiskunfélegyháza (2021). Moreover, these examples are only an important selection of the Orbán regime's memory politics, which commemorate a far-right authoritarian and give form and legitimation to far-right narratives.

Second, seizing the opportunity presented by the refugee crisis in 2015–2016, Fidesz contrived a new threatening out-group: migrants. Whereas Jobbik had previously banged the drum for action against 'gypsy crime,' and benefited from their monopoly of anti-Roma sentiment (Karácsony and Róna 2011), Fidesz representatives were quick to take control of the narrative around refugees and migrants seeking transit through Hungary. The government initiated a vociferous anti-migrant campaign that positioned Hungary as saviour of Europe. In the name of Hungarian and Christian values, no migrants, and especially not Muslim migrants, would be allowed into the country (Szalai and Gőbl 2015; Vidra 2017). This was no empty rhetoric; a fence was completed on parts of Hungary's southern border in September 2015.

Third, Fidesz and Orbán frequently paired their anti-migrant campaign with attacks against the Hungarian-born financier George Soros using antisemitic tropes. While Orbán

fostered close ties with Israel's former (until 2021) Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and supported some funding for Hungary's Jewish community, he has also repeatedly described Soros as a creeping, insidious presence in Hungarian and indeed global politics. Government-funded placards have frequently used images of the nonagenarian financier's smiling face and implored Hungarians to be aware of 'the Soros plan,' 'not to let Soros have the last laugh,' and to 'stop Soros.' In 2018, the government passed so-called Stop Soros legislation that criminalised providing certain assistance to illegal immigrants. And the government effectively evicted the Open Society Foundation and the Central European University – both funded by endowments created in part by Soros.

Fourth, the Orbán regime has ostentatiously taken a stance against certain rights for LGBTQ persons and against so-called 'gender ideology.'[3] In recent years, the government has banned university programmes on gender studies, eliminated recognition for transgender individuals, and refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention (Krizsán and Roggeband 2021) – all actions supposedly taken to protect Hungary from the threat of gender ideology. Furthermore, Fidesz passed in 2021 an anti-LGBTQ law – it shares many features with legislation proposed by Jobbik in 2012 and with the gay propaganda law passed in Russia in 2013 – that banned activities supposedly promoting homosexuality to minors and restricted sexual education in schools to groups and individuals registered by the state.

With these four issue areas Fidesz moved into the far-right ideological space previously represented by Jobbik; consequently, Jobbik changed its political profile, recasting itself as a centre-right party (Bálint et al. 2020). But this provoked factionalisation within the party. More extreme Jobbik members, led by László Toroczkai, resigned and founded in 2018 the Our Homeland Movement (*Mi Hazánk Mozgalom*) party. Toroczkai is totemic for Hungary's right-wing extremists. As a young adult, he was a member of MIÉP. In 2001, he founded the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (*Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom*, HVIM), an irredentist organisation promoting Hungarian nationalism in the territories of the former Kingdom of Hungary; HVIM has been linked to political violence, and Toroczkai is banned from entering Serbia or Slovakia in part because of his activities with HVIM. He participated in the 2006 riots after the Öszöd speech and subsequently supported Jobbik through his role as leader of the HVIM. Since 2013, as mayor of the southern-border village of Ásotthalom, Toroczkai has advocated for the construction of a border fence and used militia forces to perpetrate human rights abuses against migrants, imposed bans on Islamic religious practices (later ruled unconstitutional) and on homosexual behaviour, and founded a new paramilitary organisation (*Nemzeti Légió*) modelled on the Hungarian Guard. Yet Fidesz's shift to the far-right has left little political space for Toroczkai, his Our Homeland party, and like-minded extremists. The government's rhetoric and policies are in many instances aligned with the Hungary's extreme right.

The current phase of Hungary's post-socialist politics, which began in 2010, is marked by the hegemony of Fidesz. Since entering government, the party and Prime Minister Orbán have moved resolutely to stifle political competition on its right flank – to great effect.

Countering the far right in Hungary

Hungary, like most states, upholds the justification to confront the *extreme* right, but not the *radical* right. Legal provisions exist that enable the state to proscribe extremist actors, ban extremist demonstration activity, and punish hate crimes (see Table 12.1). However, 'exist' is nearly all these legal provisions do; courts have typically interpreted them permissively and police agencies have enforced them rarely.

Table 12.1 Legal infrastructure relevant to right-wing extremist activity

Law	*Relevant provisions*
Basic Law (the constitutional law of Hungary)	• Article VIII – right of assembly • Article IX, §4 and 5 – limitations to free speech
Act on the right of association[a]	• Article 2, §2 – associations cannot be used to commit or encourage criminal offenses or limit others' rights or liberties • Article 2, §3 – armed associations are not permitted
Penal Code[b]	• §215 – Violation against freedom of conscience and religion • §216 – Violence against a member of the community • §222 – Harassment • §254 – Attempt to overturn constitutional order by force • §255 – Conspiracy against constitutional order • §332 – Incitement against a community • §333 – Open denial of Nazi crimes and Communist crimes • §335 – Use of symbols of totalitarianism • §338 – Threat of public endangerment • §339 – Public nuisance • §340 – Disorderly conduct • §351 – Abuse of the right of association • §352 – Unlawful activities concerning the pursuit of public security
Act on the right of assembly[c]	• §9(1)(c) – prohibiting paramilitary or otherwise intimidating clothing • §13 – grounds for prohibiting an assembly (broadly including public endangerment or infringing others' rights or freedoms) • §14 – special prohibitions against denying, doubting, trivialising, or justifying crimes of Nazi or Communist regimes

Notes:

a Available in translation at: www.legislationline.org/documents/id/5353

b Available in translation at: www.legislationline.org/download/id/5619/file/HUngary_Criminal_Code_of_2012_en.pdf

c Available in translation at: www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/109320/135572/F458116280/LV_english.pdf

This laxity has only become more pronounced since the installation of Orbán's illiberal regime. Indeed, the concept of counter extremism measures may seem problematic in a regime where a form of extremism is the central political position represented by the ruling party (cf. McNeil-Willson 2021). This has led to the vilification of several liberal civil society organisations, limiting their resources and sometimes imperilling their very existence.

The upshot for counter-extremism is that, effectively, there is not much in Hungary. Below, we discuss the evolution of legal provisions aimed to curb right-wing extremism and also explain how they have failed to disrupt extremist organisation and activity. Given the failure of state actors to address right-wing extremism, civil society actors have often engaged in this work – though, as we explain, the illiberal regime's actions have impaired this activity.

State counter-extremism: permissive legal interpretation and weak enforcement

The Hungarian state's legal infrastructure has evolved reactively, responding to challenges posed by right-wing extremism. However, while it includes tools that can curb extremist activity, the judiciary and law enforcement agencies have shown reticence, or else wilful lethargy, to apply them. Given that, Hungary's counter-extremism amounts in most instances to considering whether the non-application of certain laws is cynical or apathetic.

Hungarian law allows courts to ban extremist symbols, organisations, and activities. The existence and application of these limitations was not without controversy. Whereas Western European countries had created proscription powers to counter extremism after the history of interwar and war-time fascist parties, where actors within open societies gained power and suppressed internal dissent, countries in the former Eastern Bloc had emerged from regimes where a foreign power suppressed independent political activity. Nevertheless, Hungary's first post-socialist government enacted in 1993 the Act on the Use of Totalitarian Symbols (currently, §335 of the Penal Code), which forbids public displays of 'the swastika, the insignia of the SS, the arrow cross, the sickle and hammer, and the five-pointed red star.' Szőcs (1998, p. 1108) describes how the main effect of this enactment, though it arose amid concerns about *right*-wing extremists, was to strip the walls of a bar in Budapest that was decorated in communist paraphernalia. Even if police had been intent on applying the law to right-wing extremists, those extremists were generally quick to use other totalitarian symbols that were not one of the handful listed (ibid.).

The power to ban extremist organisations (i.e., through the Association Act as well as section 351 of the Penal Code) has been used to no greater effect. Hungary's Supreme Court ruled in 1994 that the Hungarian Hungarist Movement (MHM) was illegal (Szőcs 1998). But the judiciary's fecklessness and the extremists' minor adaptation set the pattern for future proceedings against the right-wing extremist organisations. The Constitutional Court issued a statement on 24 June 1994, shortly after the ban order, asserting that freedom of expression is protected even when insulting or disconcerting; though strictly correct and seemingly innocuous, the statement was interpreted as a repudiation of the MHM ban. Meanwhile, even before being banned by the court, the MHM had regrouped as a new organisation (ibid.). Yet state authorities pursued no further action against it.

Since that episode, only three organisational bans have been imposed in Hungary. In 2005, the Blood and Honour Cultural Association (*Vér és Becsület Kulturális Egyesület*), a Hungarian branch of the transnational Neo-Nazi music organisation, was banned for violations of the Penal Code and Association Act but re-formed and continued to operate as the Homeland Unity Movement (*Hazáért Egység Mozgalom*). In 2009, the Hungarian Guard, the paramilitary group connected to Jobbik, was banned but re-formed and continued to operate as the New Hungarian Guard and the Association for a Better Future. And in 2014, the Association for a Better Future was banned but immediately re-formed as the Hungarian Defence Movement and continued its activities. Proscription of Hungarian right-wing extremist organisations has been made into a minor bureaucratic formality with no significant force or effect on extremist organisational activity.

The continuity of right-wing extremist activity, often heedless of organisational bans, is on display in several demonstration campaigns, especially in two instances. In 1997, the Hungarian National Front (MNA) organised a march for the 'Day of Honour,' commemorating the attempt by Hungarian and German Waffen-SS soldiers in February 1945 to

break out of encirclement by Soviet forces (Virchow 2013). The event has been held every year since, later organised by Blood and Honour and its descendant organisations. From its inception, the campaign trivialised the crimes of the Nazi regime and violated several Penal Code provisions. By 2009 the event – organised not by the Blood and Honour Cultural Association, banned in 2005, but by Blood and Honour Hungaria – had as many as 2,000 participants. In 2019 and 2020, police departments initially prohibited parts of the event, but court rulings overturned these decisions. With the Day of Honour campaign, as in other examples, state authorities have shied away from consistently and resolutely enforcing laws meant to curb right-wing extremist activity.

Similarly, right-wing extremist organisations and paramilitary groups in the late-2000s initiated demonstration campaigns intended to confront so-called 'gypsy criminality.' Spurred on, and in some instances directed, by Jobbik, these demonstrations intimidated Roma communities around Hungary, as apparently this was their aim. Indeed, their threatening character was the main justification for banning the Hungarian Guard – though, as mentioned above, this decision proved only a minor disruption of the group and its activities. What is more, the demonstrations did more than intimidate and threaten; terrorist activity, the perpetrators having connections to far-right groups, resulted in six deaths, multiple injuries, and property damage. Yet the peak of tensions emerged in 2011 when paramilitaries 'invaded' the town of Gyöngyöspata (Feischmidt and Szombati 2012). They conducted nightly patrols, harassed Roma residents, and stoked interethnic tensions – all at the behest of some ethnic Hungarians in the town and with minimal interference from the police. These anti-Roma campaigns prompted the government to amend the Penal Code in 2011 to forbid threatening members of ethnic, national, or religious minorities. However, a variety of laws already prohibited the type of activities seen in Gyöngyöspata. What remains is the problem of enforcement.

In recent years, the government has adopted new policies, including a protocol that entered into force in 2019 on hate crimes for the police and prosecutors, and modified provisions to enable charges for hateful offences. However, law enforcement actors have seldom received training on these new provisions; when they have, it was typically conducted by non-governmental organisations.

Non-government responses

The Hungarian state's deficiencies in addressing right-wing extremism have often spurred non-governmental actors to take up the charge. Broadly, non-governmental counter-extremism activities come in three categories: political mobilisation, anti-racist activism, and contribution to policymaking.

Political mobilisation constituted one of the most crucial civil society responses to the rising far-right threat in the 1990s. The Democratic Charter movement, founded in 1992, problematised the issue that right-wing extremism existed within the right-wing ruling coalition. The movement successfully generated mass mobilisation, whereas preceding anti-racist mobilisation had been limited to a small circle of liberal intellectuals (Szőcs 1998). The mid-2000s saw another important phase in political mobilisation against the far-right, though it was not as extensive or impactful. Demonstrations and activities seeking to counter the Hungarian Guard were organised by Roma and human rights groups. They organised themselves to meet the members of the Hungarian Guard when marching through villages and staging hate demonstrations. Generally, though, counter-mobilisation was sporadic and failed to mobilise large numbers of people. On some occasions, clashes erupted between

the far-right and the anti-racist groups – though these disturbances of public order never prompted serious state sanctions against far-right demonstrations (cf. Zeller 2022).

Some civil society actors have also pursued broader programmes of anti-racist activism. A handful of organisations implement projects to counter anti-gypsy, antisemitic, and anti-LGBTQ attitudes. The inauguration of Orbán's illiberal government brought forth political pressure on several of these organisations that received funding from foreign sources. The government did not have an anti-extremism strategy, but the fact that organisations active in the field received financial support from abroad made them suspicious to the regime. The political climate was unfavourable to some of the organisations not only because of the political pressure, but also because of the government's political position that embraced and endorsed extremism in its rhetoric and certain policies. The Working Group Against Hate Crimes (GYEM) was an alliance of four civil rights organisations working on anti-discrimination. In their 2021 report, they asserted that

> it is our experience that almost no effective anti-racism measures and legal strategies have been implemented, we can say quite the opposite: the central government has largely contributed to racism being highly accepted within our society and in the course of public communication.
>
> *GYEM 2021, p. 3*

The government's direct attacks as well as its contribution to mainstreaming and elevating racist and exclusionary rhetoric has curtailed the capacity of independent anti-racist activism.

Civil society actors are even stymied when they attempt to work with state institutions. A review of the implementation of anti-racism projects (Kende et.al. 2018) found that state institutions are closed off and refuse dialogue with civil organisations. This characterises the post-2010 period. For NGOs, it was not possible to establish contacts with government ministries and state institutions. Part of the government's application of political pressure on civil society includes depriving them of any influence on policymaking and implementation. Concomitant to political attacks on civil society is the marginalisation of academic expertise. Prior to the illiberal regime, there had always been various forms of collaboration between academia, civil society, and certain policy fields relevant on ethnic and minority discrimination and integration. These collaborations ceased to exist with the establishment of the illiberal regime. In general, the government tends to ignore or even be hostile to expert knowledge; many of the issues related to anti-racism and anti-discrimination, or fields relevant to building resilience against extremism, have been labelled a leftist-liberal ideology. The only niche where collaboration between academic research, civil society operations, and policymakers has been possible is in municipalities where opposition parties came into power in the 2019 local elections.

Concluding remarks

Through the three phases of Hungary's post-socialist politics there was a steady progression of far-right social forces. Notwithstanding the evolution of actors in this scene, parties and social movement organisations mobilising, demobilising, and shifting to represent different ideologies, the rise of the Hungarian far-right has been fairly consistent. In the 1990s, Hungary's far-right re-emerged and created a network of organisations – these foundations still underlie the contemporary far-right scene – but was marginalised politically. In the late 2000s, the far-right movement emerged and mobilised masses; a far-right party attracted a

large constituency of voters. Their impact on the public sphere, however, was even more remarkable. Through marches and media campaigns, they succeeded in mainstreaming racist anti-Roma discourses and agenda-setting far-right issues. This was the phase of far-right ascendancy. Since 2010 the thrust of Jobbik and several far-right movement organisations has been blunted through the Orbán regime's appropriation of far-right rhetoric and policies.

Hungarian government counter-extremism policies and practices typically have been reactive rather than proactive and have suffered from permissive legal interpretation and weak enforcement. This characterises earlier phases of Hungary's post-socialist politics and indeed accurately describes the pattern under the current political system, dominated by Fidesz. Looking back, the Fidesz government's actions to address extremist mobilisations were trivial. Looking forward, the government has adopted few measures to address how individuals are exposed to extremist views online and has created no de-radicalisation programme that would help individuals exit extremist activism. Any decrease in recent extremist activity is likely attributable to 'problem depletion' (cf. Davenport 2015), whereby Fidesz's ideological shift to the far-right has sapped the mobilising potential of right-wing extremists.

Notes

1 Szőcs (1998) offers a bespoke three-fold typology of extremist actors during this period in Hungary – namely, hangover parties, neo-fascist nostalgia parties, and imitative Neo-Nazis –but it is fitted to the conditions of the 1990s. To clarify the development of the far-right throughout the phases of post-socialist Hungarian politics we prefer the radical/extreme distinction, which offers more consistent analytical leverage. A noteworthy alternative conception of sub-types of the far right is Minkenberg's (2013) four-fold typology, though his 'religious-fundamentalist right' type is insignificant in Hungary.
2 In 2006, right-wing parties won no more than 50 per cent of the vote. In 2010, that became nearly 70 per cent: Fidesz won upwards of 52 per cent and Jobbik upwards of 16 per cent. The pattern held in 2014: nearly 45 per cent for Fidesz and over 20 per cent for Jobbik; and in 2018, more than 49 per cent for Fidesz and 19 per cent for Jobbik.
3 'Gender ideology' is a floating signifier commonly used by conservative or parochial actors to refer to a range of facts and postulates, including that abortion should be legal, that there is a need for campaigns against gender-based violence, that homosexuals should be allowed to marry and adopt, and that gender is non-binary. Some opponents of 'gender ideology' equate it with totalitarian ideologies.

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