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Hungary: Political Developments and Data in 2020

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Introduction

The year 2020 was dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which created a *modus operandi* of ongoing crisis management. Indeed, ensuring the safety of people at the same time as facing the unavoidable economic and social setbacks presented a truly severe challenge. In the shadow of the pandemic, however, crucial changes affecting human rights, local self-government and education were also introduced.

Cabinet report

In 2020, the main focus of the government (for composition see table 1) was on Covid-related initiatives; thus, there is an overview of the Hungarian measures introduced in 2020 to alleviate the effects of the pandemic based on the data offered by a Eurofound (2020) report. Regarding essential workers in Hungary, employees in research and development (R&D) positions in Covid-19-related research received a wage supplement of 40 per cent of the gross monthly salary for three months. To ensure that businesses could finance their fixed costs, various grants were introduced, such as reduced tax on labour in the tourism, catering and entertainment sectors, an exemption from social insurance tax, and protection from rent increases and rent contract termination for affected companies. To support the stability of employment, the reduction of working time was subsidized with the criteria of prohibiting the dismissal of workers included in the policy scheme. A freeze on repayments of loans was introduced for every loan contract (including mortgages) signed before 18 March 2020, and the length of time allocated for repayment was lengthened. Students were also provided with access to interest-free loans to pay for living expenses.

Teleworking and remote working were encouraged and the share of workers working from home peaked in May–June 2020, reaching 17 per cent (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2021). While remote working was not officially introduced in public administration in 2020, the availability and use of digital public services such as the Electronic Health Cooperation Service Space (EESZT) increased significantly.

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Table 1. Cabinet composition of Orbán IV in Hungary in 2020

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	18 May 2018	Dissolution	Still in office at the end of the year	
Period covered by table	From	1 January 2020	Until	31 December 2020	
Type of Cabinet	Oversized Coalition				

A.	Party/gender composition on 1 January 2020			Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
				N	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
	Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union	*Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség*	(Fidesz)	7	53.8%	2	28.6%	116	58.8%
	Christian Democratic People's Party	*Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*	(KDNP)	4	30.8%	0	0.0%	17	8.5%
	No party affiliation			2	15.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	Totals			13	100.0%	2	15.4%	133	67.3%

B.	Composition of Orbán IV Cabinet on 1 January 2020 See previous editions of the *Political Data Yearbook for Hungary* or http://politicaldatayearbook.com

C.	Changes in composition of Orbán IV Cabinet during 2020 Ministerial title		Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister					Comments
	Minister without portfolio for Family Affairs	*Családokért felelős tárca nélküli miniszter*			Katalin	Novák	1977	Female	Fidesz	New ministerial position created, 30 September 2020

D.	Party/gender composition on 31 December 2020			Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
				N	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
	Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union	*Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség*	(Fidesz)	8	57.1%	3	37.5%	116	58.8%
	Christian Democratic People's Party	*Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*	(KDNP)	4	28.6%	0	0.0%	17	8.5%
	No party affiliation			2	14.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	Totals			14	100.0%	3	21.4%	133	67.3%

Sources: Website of the Hungarian government, www.kormany.hu; and website of the Hungarian National Assembly, www.parlament.hu, 2021.

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Parliament report

Regarding parliamentary work, no major changes can be documented in 2020 as parliamentary party groups remained relatively stable (see table 2) with some MPs of Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary/*Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom* – Jobbik) leaving the party (see Political party report). However, it is worth mentioning that 2020 saw a record fine of €12,000 when the Speaker of the House, László Kövér, fined Péter Jakab, leader of the opposition party Jobbik, for placing a bag of potatoes on the desk of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, suggesting that the Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union/*Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (Fidesz) had bought votes for potatoes at the previous elections. According to the Speaker, who has the right of discipline according to the Act XXXVI of 2012 on the National Assembly, Jakab violated the disciplinary rules of the House.

Political party report

Regarding party cohesion and strength, Fidesz preserved its dominance and even profited from the narrative of the successful management of the Covid crisis. Despite some scandals, including the arrest of József Szájer, founder of Fidesz and MEP while fleeing an illegal gay party via the roof, or the suspension of the membership of Tamás Deutch, MEP in the European People's Party (EPP) for comparing Manfred Weber with the Gestapo, Fidesz headed in the polls throughout the year.

Facing the challenge of the upcoming elections in 2022, opposition parties were pressured to cooperate and work out the terms of their coordination. The first tangible step in their coordination came in August when the six major opposition parties – the Democratic Coalition/*Demokratikus Koalíció* (DK), the Hungarian Socialist Party/*Magyar Szocialista Párt* (MSZP), Momentum, Dialogue for Hungary/*Párbeszéd Magyarországért* (PM), Politics Can Be Different/*Lehet Más a Poliitka* (LMP) and Jobbik – issued a statement about joining forces for 2022 and launching the negotiations about nominating joint candidates in each of the 106 single-member districts in Hungary. The second step came in the fall when the same parties announced that they would nominate one joint candidate for Prime Minister by 23 October 2021. Finally, in December 2020, an agreement about setting up a joint list was also declared. The latter agreement also specified that the candidates running in Single Member Districts (SMDs) as well as the candidate for Prime Minister would be chosen through primaries organized by the civil organization aHang which ran the primaries for Budapest mayor in 2019. The SMD candidates would be selected in one round, while the Prime Ministerial candidates would face a two-round election.

While political realities such as the electoral system as well as the expectations of the electorate point toward the necessity of cooperation, the relationship between the opposition parties does have some problems. In January 2020, Jobbik elected a new party president, Péter Jakab, who ran on an agenda of cooperating with opposition parties. While Jakab became rather popular among opposition voters, several of the party members decided to leave it and join the 'Our Country Movement', which split from Jobbik in 2018 (Várnagy, 2019).

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Table 2. Party and gender composition of Parliament (*Magyar Országgyűlés*) in Hungary in 2020

Party			1 January 2020				31 December 2020			
			All		Women		All		Women	
			N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union	*Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség*	(Fidesz)	116	58.9%	10	8.6%	116	58.3%	11	9.5%
Movement for a Better Hungary	*Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom*	(Jobbik)	21	10.7%	2	9.5%	17	8.6%	1	5.9%
Christian Democratic People's Party	*Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*	(KDNP)	17	8.6%	1	5.9%	17	8.6%	1	5.9%
Hungarian Socialist Party	*Magyar Szocialista Párt*	(MSZP)	15	7.6%	3	20.0%	15	7.5%	3	30.0%
Politics Can Be Different	*Lehet Más a Poliitka*	(LMP)	6	3.0%	3	50.0%	6	3.0%	3	50.0%
Democratic Coalition	*Demokratikus Koalíció*	(DK)	8	4.1%	2	25.0%	9	4.5%	2	22.2%
Dialogue for Hungary	*Párbeszéd Magyarországért*	(PM)	5	2.5%	1	20.0%	5	2.5%	1	20.0%
Members from Nationality List			1	0.5%	0	0.0%	1	0.5%	0	0.0%
Independent			8	4.1%	2	25.0%	13	6.5%	3	23.1%
Totals			197	100.0%	24	12.2%	199	100.0%	25	12.6%

Note: During 2019, two MPs of the Democratic Coalition left the party. One seat was filled from the party list at the previous election, while the other seat was filled by a former independent MP. As a result, the number of independent MPs decreased, and the total number of MPs was 197 on 1 January 2020.
Source: Official website of the Hungarian National Assembly, www.parlament.hu, 2021.

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At the same time, the Democratic Coalition seemed to attract politicians of the MSZP (the schism between the two parties happened in 2011) such as the mayor of III district in Budapest, László Kiss, and the mayor of the XVIII district in Budapest, Sándor Szaniszló, who both quit MSZP to join the ranks of DK. As of 2020, it remained an open question how these tensions would affect the primaries: would parties make pre-election pacts and nominate joint candidates already at the primaries or would they test the waters by having multiple contestants?

In terms of the party landscape, the European Parliament and its party groups are also relevant as the EPP has maintained a strained relationship with Fidesz during 2020 due to its assessment of the rule of law and Fidesz's anti-Brussels rhetoric. In February, the EPP prolonged the suspension of Fidesz that was put in force in 2019 banning Fidesz MEPs from participating in EPP meetings, depriving them of the right to vote or obtain leadership positions.

Institutional change report

At the end of 2020, the government put forward a new, 9th amendment to the Hungarian Constitution, which prescribes the foundations of a family by stating that a mother is a woman and a father is a man. The new regulation only allows married couples to adopt children, and those single parents who are granted special permission by the government. As many civil organizations pointed out, this measure makes it impossible for people in gay relationships to adopt as are single parents. The explanatory text attached to the amendment proposal explains the need to protect children from mental or biological interventions and guarantee their right to self-identity referencing Christian values and national self-identification. The amendment is not the first in a series of attacks against the LGBTQ+ rights because in May the Hungarian Parliament approved a bill defining gender based on chromosomes at birth, practically banning the gender change thus undermining trans rights. Both initiatives revoked debates about human rights and LGBTQ+ rights in the country, which seems to be in line with the Fidesz agenda of mounting a cultural war against liberal values.

Aside from major institutional changes, there has been crucial changes in financing schemes in different sectors, the two most important being local governments and institutions of higher education. Under the framework of pandemic management, crucial changes have been introduced to the revenue structure of local governments. The 2019 local elections saw some opposition candidates winning in Budapest and other bigger cities (Várnagy, 2020) resulting in an ongoing conflict between opposition-led local governments (including the political leadership of the capital, Budapest) and the Orbán government. Even before the pandemic, the government weakened the powers of municipalities by limiting their rights in approving construction projects. In Budapest, the conflicts included the appointment of directors of publicly funded theatres and ongoing constructions in Budapest City Park. A more severe cut concerned the income of municipalities when a regulation prescribed that local taxes collected from companies residing in a given municipality should be spent on local transportation. With the pandemic, more disadvantageous fiscal measures were adopted: the financing of various local projects was

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abandoned in order to transfer the money to Covid-relief funds, parking fees – a key income for municipalities – were abolished while automobile taxes were centralized. While many of the above-mentioned measures affect all municipalities with disregard to their political leanings, the analysis of Policy Solutions points out how severely opposition-led municipalities' budgets suffered and how it decreased their ability to exercise their right to self-government (Policy Solutions, 2021: 31–33).

Higher education also saw a crucial shift in models of management: instead of government subsidies, selected universities became financed and managed by a trust fund founded by business share packages transferred from the state and formerly state-owned assets. The first university to test out the new model was Corvinus University of Budapest in 2019 followed by other universities (among others, the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, the Széchenyi István University and the University of Veterinary Medicine) in 2020. The flagship of the new model became the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE) when its management was taken over by a foundation head by Attila Vidnyászky, director of Hungary's National Theater and a well-known Fidesz supporter. SZFE was the first to openly protest and resist the change with the rector and leading professors resigning from the institution and students blockading the university building and refusing to acknowledge the new leadership of the university. The blockade lasted for several months until new coronavirus restrictions were introduced in November. Despite the intensity of the protest, including a march against the rulings and the attention the event evoked internationally, the state followed through with the privatization model with the new leadership shutting down the university until February 2021. At the same time, Mathias Corvinus College (MCC), led by Balázs Orbán, state secretary of the Fidesz government, received public funds (worth around €800 million) to finance its advanced studies programmes for high-school and university students.

Issues in national politics

In 2020, the most important issues in national politics revolved around the Covid pandemic. With the first wave hitting in spring, and the second wave in the fall of 2020, the public debates focused on the measures taken to control the spread of the virus as well as on the economic measures taken to lessen the impact of the recession. The first wave did not hit Hungary very severely (the peak of new cases for a seven-day period remained under 100) and restrictions were partly lifted during the summer; the second wave saw the emergence of more than 6600 new cases per day at the end of December 2020 (Dong-Du-Gardner, 2020). In politics, the crisis allowed the government to further undermine the tools of democratic control, which intensified the international criticism of the Orbán regime.

The first wave of the pandemic was officially recognized in mid-March when several consecutive restrictions were adopted to halt the spread of Covid-19. A shelter-in-place order was introduced along with online education in schools and a ban on public gatherings. Cinemas, theatres and other entertainment venues were closed, along with shops, with the exception of those serving basic necessities. Restaurants and bars could only serve takeaway orders until 3 p.m. each day. The management of directly Covid-related tasks such

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as testing were centralized, while military officials were appointed to monitor hospitals and to overview the distribution of resources at state companies offering critical services.

At the end of March, a state of emergency was declared by the Law on Protecting Against the Coronavirus named the 'Enabling Act' because it granted a wider range of regulatory powers to the government. The state of emergency was lifted on 18 June. With the arrival of the second wave it was reintroduced on 4 November and remained in place through the rest of 2020.

The Enabling Act itself was highly controversial because while there was a widespread consensus about the need for declaring a state of emergency, critics argued that the law allocated unprecedented power to the Prime Minister by allowing him to govern by decree and by banning all elections and referenda during the crisis. New types of crimes were also specified in the law: among others, the spread of fake information about the virus was banned and the violators could be punished by up to five years in prison. People breaching the quarantine were also subject to severe punishments. Some civil organizations protested the vague definition offered by the law expressing a concern over the right to free speech and media freedom. However, the most problematic aspect of the law was that it did not specify an end date to the state of emergency. The decision brought about an international backlash with the European Parliament adopting a resolution (17 April) that focused on the need for coordinated European action against the pandemic, but it also declared how the indefinite state of emergency along with governing by decree were incompatible measures with European democratic values.

Conflicts between the Hungarian government and the European Union went beyond the decisions taken in relation to Covid, as the state of the rule of law in Hungary has been relentlessly debated within the European Union. In order to exercise pressure on its member countries, the new budget and recovery package of the European Union included a rule of law mechanism restricting access to funds for actors who commit violations of the rule of law. The mechanism was highly criticized by Hungary (and Poland) who threatened a veto if such conditionality applied. The conflict was resolved by suspending the implementation of the rule-of-law conditionality until the European Court of Justice rules on the validity of the decision.

Public concern also followed the resignation of the editorial staff of Index, the leading online news portal in Hungary. During the summer, the portal signalled that the editors were under external pressure and a 'independence barometer' was published on the website signalling that the portal's independence was in jeopardy. The protest intensified the conflict between the editor-in-chief and the portal's owners, leading to the walk-out of most of the journalists working for Index. The move further advanced the hegemony of Fidesz in the Hungarian media landscape as Indamedia, a pro-government media company, acquired ownership of Index.hu in November 2020.

Facing conflicts in the domestic and international sphere is not new to Fidesz as many of the measures described in this article were highly contested and criticized from the takeover of SZFE to the question of LMBTQ+ rights. Building a confrontational strategy and taking up the role of defending national and Christian values are core elements of Fidesz's behaviour and rhetoric that are also reflected in the narrative built around the pandemic. The question for the upcoming year is how far it will take and what consequences of the alienation will Fidesz face in the European Union and at home.

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