Hungary

Spatial Identity Politics and the Right in Hungary

by **Péter Balogh**

Given that Hungary has now been ruled by a rightist government with a two-thirds majority for eleven and a half years, questions of identity politics and the political right are highly relevant. Additionally, in relation to its geographical size and economic weight, the country has received considerable international attention over the recent decade. This is also because Hungarian policies are not taking place in isolation; instead, like many other movements the political right too is increasingly networked globally. To take a recent example, August this year saw a week-long visit to Hungary by Tucker Carlson, *Fox News*'s political commentator whose show is regularly followed by millions of Americans. As numerous media outlets (e.g. *BBC, The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*) reported, while broadcasting from Budapest Carlson praised the country and its prime minister, Viktor Orbán, for rejecting asylum seekers on its border, and ridiculed the idea that the latter was authoritarian.

"Trump Congratulates PM Orbán after Tucker Show", in *Hungary Today* September 1, 2021.

The Question of Labeling the Right

The above brings up the somewhat difficult question on how exactly to label the incumbent Hungarian government. It goes without saying that – similarly to most rightist parties in the world – Hungary's Fidesz and Christian Democratic People's Party (which form the government coalition) would never refer to themselves as far-right. Representatives of the opposition parties do apply that label on the government occasionally, but perhaps not systematically. Unsurprisingly, the labels used by political commentators tend to reflect the standpoint from which they write. More interestingly, different labels appear in academic publications as well, as will be shown. To some extent, this also reflects shifts within the Hungarian right.

Up until a decade ago, few would have labeled Fidesz far-right. Its shift in the late 1990s from a liberal profile to national conservatism is well known. This placed the party right of center, in distinction to the unquestionably far-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party, which however lost significance in the 2000s and was formally dissolved this year. Instead, the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) was the country's main far-right party between the mid-2000s and the mid-2010s. What happened in the early 2010s was that Fidesz selectively took over some of Jobbik's ideas, thus incorporating lower middle-class rural voters and giving up on some of its urban middle-class electorate. In parallel to a stronger nationalist

September 21, 2015. Viktor Orbán addressing the National Assembly in Budapest on dealing with mass migration. The Assembly decided with a 2/3 majority vote to empower the Hungarian Defense Forces to assist the police at the borders of Hungary.

PHOTO: ELEKES ANDOR/ WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

rhetoric, this included for instance an embracement of neo-Turanism which until then was largely associated with Jobbik. That ideology, with all its anti-establishment and anti-Western elements, fits well with the increasingly anti-Brussels rhetoric and policies of Fidesz.[1] The government and its voters apparently do not see or mind any contradictions in blending neo-pagan Turanist ideas with their more pronounced Christian-national conservatism.

Fidesz and especially its leaders have labeled their own ideology in various ways over the past decade. In the early 2010s, they would refer to some of their own policies as unorthodox. The prime minister's (in)famous 2014 speech on building an illiberal state has received global attention and criticism, so much so that 3–4 years ago the new keyword became Christian democracy. However, several Christian Democrats, especially in Germany, have distanced themselves from the Hungarian right's understanding of this, and Fidesz's exit from the European People's Party earlier this year is well-known. More stable has been the national-conservative (self-)label.

Various designations have seen light in (and sometimes within the same) scholarly works, too. Orbán's above-mentioned speech makes it unsurprising that references to illiberalism appear in a number of analyses.[2] The term populism has been associated with Hungary for a longer time but is enduring.[3] It can appear in different varieties, ranging from populist democracy to radical-right populism.[4] But modern writings on authoritarian attitudes also slightly predate the long reign of the current government, although such approaches have certainly become more present.[5] In general, the label far-right was typically attached to Jobbik up until the mid-2010s, but has more recently also come to be linked with the incumbent government.[6]

Regarding Jobbik, the party has turned less radical in the last 6–7 years[7] and has aligned itself this year with the anti-government coalition dominated by left-of-center and centrist political forces. Hungary does have a new ultra-national opposition party since 2018 (Our Homeland Movement) which can be characterized as far-right beyond any dispute, but it "only" has two seats out of 199 in the National Assembly. The more interesting question therefore is how the two-thirds majority government has been shaping identity politics. Unlike many other papers, though, this contribution focuses on how such politics have been linked to various spatial categories.

Spatial Identity Politics

The three words in the title of this section appear together in this form relatively rarely, but

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Orbán in Kyrgyzstan, 2018, on a high-level meeting with representatives from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan.
PHOTO: MINISZTERELNOK.HU

the connection between space, identity and/or ideology[8] have of course already been studied by scholars of critical geopolitics, for instance. A key lesson from that body of literature is that geographical labels are never neutral but are always linked in one way or another with various ideas and intentions.[9] Like many concepts, geographical designations can also be treated as empty signifiers which can be filled with different content and meaning for various purposes. It is the intentions and effects of such meaning-making, then, that is of primary interest.

While identity politics has a large literature in itself, a common feature is a critique that such politics tend to essentialize various ideas associated with any given (social) group.[10] Imbuing various spaces with identity politics can be at least as contested in the sense that residents of the affected territory may or may not identify with such politics, but will be impacted by them, nevertheless. To a certain extent, members of a spatially bound community cannot retreat as easily as those of social groups who no longer feel represented by actors who (allegedly) speak on their behalf. Spatial identity politics can also be particularly divisive in societies that tend to be less consensual and where competing imaginations are deployed. In Hungary, much of the opposition has embraced more mainstream understandings of Europe in recent years, whereas the government has leant on a dual narrative of idealizing the East and an alternative vision of the West.

The Hungarian Government and the Question of East and West

Over the past decade, leading figures of the Hungarian government have vehemently engaged in civilizationist discourses and spatial identity politics. This was triggered partly by the economic crisis around 2009 which hit the country particularly hard, and partly by growing political tensions between Hungary and the EU due to contested steps taken by the national government.

In the early 2010s, a discourse was launched that "we will not be a colony", targeting both the EU and (mostly western) multinational corporations. However, a decade later Hungary relies on foreign capital and in many ways on the EU just as much as it did then. State debt remains on a similar level as a decade ago, even if the high share of foreign debt has decreased. Based on data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, FDI's share remains almost two thirds of the national GDP, around three fourths of which stem from other EU countries. Similarly, three fourths of Hungary's foreign trade is with other EU members. In addition, the country has received EU structural funds annually, equaling about five per cent of its national GDP (which also happens to equal its annual growth). Although the amount of trade and investments with non-EU countries has grown somewhat lately, this also applies to that with other EU countries, meaning that the overall proportions have changed little. Hungary continues to depend on the EU and its members in a multitude of ways. Nevertheless, the claim that "we will not be a colony" was also mentioned in Orbán's very recent speech upon his reelection as head of Fidesz.

As a strategy to diversify the country's trade partners, the Opening to the East program was launched eleven years ago, and has remained one of the key priorities of Hungarian foreign policy. As András Rácz reported in a *Válasz Online* article on August 11, 2019, the aim was that one third of Hungarian exports should head eastward, which has not been achieved since only about a fifth go outside the EU. Instead, the Opening to the East has come to be associated with large-scale Russian and

Chinese investments which lack both transparency and completion, with their feasibility remaining doubtful. Although it makes sense for any country to diversify its trade and investment partners, the above-discussed strategy has more underpinned a political message – namely that Hungary has a role to play not just within the EU. Since 2018, the country also has an observer status in the Turkic Council. Most recently, Orbán has initiated a summit of that council and the Visegrád Group, to be held in Budapest next year.

There is a certain segment among the Hungarian population to which the premodern nation's eastern roots are meaningful and worth cherishing. That segment has been embraced by the government over the past decade, partly as a strategy to win over Jobbik voters and partly as it suits the Opening to the East program discussed above. The largest popular manifestation of this is the annual/biannual Kurultáj festival, a three-day megaevent on the Great Hungarian Plain, attended each time by around 200,000 visitors from Hungary and other countries and nations imagined to belong to the large Turanian family. Beyond being devoted to the nomad culture of ancient Hungarian and Turkic tribes, several rightist politicians (including the prime minister) also appear at the event, which has been supported since 2012 with a growing amount of public money. The ideology behind it is Turanism, which at various times in Hungary's modern history has been embraced as an alternative to the nation's much more deeply rooted western identity.[11]

The Revival of Central Europe as a Christian Bulwark

Based on Eurobarometer and other surveys, the Hungarian population has stably remained among those most positively inclined toward their country's EU membership (around 70%). The Hungarian government is obviously aware of this but has nevertheless – or because of this – launched several anti-Brussels campaigns over the past decade. But what exactly Europe should stand for is a divisive issue among Hungarians, though less for their government. Especially since the refugee crisis of 2015, the new-old self-image of Hungary as a Christian bulwark – a protector of western Christian civilization – has been propagated, with some specific political and societal consequences.[12] Yet rather than achieving greater cohesion, such policies and ideas have become more divisive in Hungary, Europe and beyond.

As Mark Bassin points out in his contribution to this volume, "the image of a menacing Other is more effective and compelling when it is materialized and projected on the map as a distinct geographical entity."[13] For the Hungarian government, that geographical entity has increasingly become a reimagined and redefined Central Europe. True, Central Europe (Közép-Európa) has in Hungary been associated with at least two competing narratives. What unites them is an understanding of the notion as a channel of protest against large powers; in the 1980s especially against the Soviet Union. What divides them is whether they see the region as part of the West, or at least of Mitteleuropa as defined in Germany and Austria. In the last two decades of the 20th century, some (dissident) Hungarian authors embraced a definition of Central Europe that was not that dissimilar to Mitteleuropa.[14] However, more numerous have been the works that see the region as a sui generis entity and identity space.[15] These are implicitly closer to the concept of Zwischeneuropa (Köztes-Európa), an interwar term for the countries between Germany and the USSR.

Viktor Orbán, who was also prime minister around the millennium, at that time already emphasized the need for Central European countries to hold together even in a future EU. But following the eastern enlargement, discourses on Central Europe waned. For about half a decade, Hungary including much of its political elite was happy to have "returned" to Europe. That consensus began to shake with the 2009 economic crisis but was exacerbated by the 2015 refugee crisis which partly revived the East–West divide within the EU. Above all, it was the Hungarian government that diverged from the Western European mainstream. Its leaders have redefined Central Europe's mission in Europe as "to save the latter from

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itself", as the prime minister then repeatedly claimed.

The policies and ideas associated with this redefined Central Europe were recently analyzed elsewhere.[16] In Hungary at least, that geographical label has, in the last few years, primarily been associated with the Visegrád Group: however, Central Europe is also widely used because it is a more malleable term which can occasionally include some neighbors of Hungary that happen to share interests in any given policy field.[17]

But the core of this reimagined Central Europe, the Visegrád Four, also has its diverging interests internally. Its members have quite different approaches toward Russia, with Poland and Hungary being the two most diverging cases. This is particularly noteworthy as it is exactly the governments of these two that have revived and redefined Visegrád. For years, Eurozone member Slovakia and Czechia have been expressing a limited interest in Orbán's and Kaczyński's self-proclaimed cultural "counter-revolution" and a desire to be closer to core Europe. Relatedly, Fidesz does not always find its allies in Central Europe but elsewhere – including the West (such as in Italy, France or the US). Although Hungarian–Slovak relations have considerably improved over the past decade, tensions due to some of Hungary's engagements in southern Slovakia (which hosts a large ethnic Hungarian group) still flare up occasionally. This fall, the Hungarian government had planned to buy farmland in southern Slovakia but withdrew following criticism by that country's representatives, as for instance Euractiv reported in an article on October 13. In their turn, Polish–Czech relations seriously deteriorated this year due to conflicts over a coal mine at Turów located right at the border. Moreover, when it comes to taking decisions in Brussels, Visegrád states have not necessarily tended to vote along the same lines over the last years. Finally, the national economies of the region have now also been competing for decades for more or less similar types of external investments.

All this points to the difficulty of demarcating (geo)political alliances on adjacent territories as well as of defining spatial identity regions. True, it makes sense for neighboring countries to cooperate on a number of issues, or even to lobby together in international fora. For instance, Visegrád states cooperated a few years ago when their authorities revealed that some multinationals were distributing lower-quality consumer products in the EU's eastern markets, or when Austria wanted to pay lower social benefits to East Central European workers and their family members. But in which situations and fields alliance-building actually takes place tends to be defined by the agenda of the day and specific issues, rather than by fixed notions of regions filled with homogenous ideological content.

Conclusions

Rightist parties are strong in Hungary and this article has presented a wide range of approaches applied to them, some of which include the label far-right while others do not. More crucial is the question of what such parties have intended to do and what they have (or have not) achieved. This contribution focused on the sorts of spatial identity politics engaged in by the main rightist forces in Hungary. It has shown that such politics have been a key priority on their agendas over the past decade, with mixed outcomes.

While since the 2008–2009 financial crisis many countries in the West and elsewhere have been keen on expanding their relations with Asia, in Hungary this has also been underpinned by ideologies of to some extent also belonging to the East and a distancing from the West. What concrete gains this has yielded for the country remains doubtful so far. Further, ideas of an eastern affinity to some degree fit ill with Hungary's more established western identity, especially at a time when the country's self-image as a Christian bulwark is also heavily emphasized. Nevertheless, what unites both spatial identity narratives is a denunciation of more mainstream ideas of Europe. The Hungarian right has found some allies for that in Central Europe, which it has imagined as a (geo)political alliance to redefine not just the

region but the whole of Europe. However, it is also encountering a number of sceptics in Central Europe and is thus trying to build ties to like-minded actors outside the region, also in the West. Orbán's most recent idea of bringing together the Visegrád Four and the Turkic Council may be an attempt to counterbalance Western Europe and other powers, but such an alliance can of course not be based on a self-image as a Christian bulwark. All this points to the difficulty of delimiting ideologically and politically cohesive identity regions. ●

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