



# Orbán's Hungary

## A Cautionary Tale About the Perils of Right-Wing National Populism

By William Danvers      November 28, 2016

The recent U.S. presidential election caught much of the world by surprise and raised a number of questions about how the new administration will govern. Was the rhetoric on the campaign trail a harbinger of things to come, was it a divisive campaign strategy to get elected, or a bit of both? Either way, there is reason for concern and dismay.

Taking a closer look at the Trump campaign, there are parallels to the right-wing national populist political movements in Europe. The recent transformation of Hungarian politics—in particular, the metamorphosis of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, leader of the ruling Fidesz Party—offers a cautionary tale of what can happen when a right-wing national populist leader gets elected.

Unfortunately, Orbán, who has been invited to Washington by President-elect Donald Trump,<sup>1</sup> is only one part of a larger right-wing national populist phenomenon that has taken root in Europe. For example, he is an inspiration for Jarosław Kaczyński, head of the Polish Law and Justice Party, or PiS, which now controls Poland's government.<sup>2</sup> The PiS, taking a page out of Orbán's playbook, has been trying to consolidate its power by doing such things as attacking Poland's Constitutional Tribunal, its highest court.<sup>3</sup> The idea behind this and related moves in Hungary and Poland is to ensure that once the party is in power, it will remain there by rigging the system to make sure its leaders can get specific programs enacted and create a more favorable electoral climate.

The Fidesz Party in Hungary and the PiS in Poland, in charge of their respective governments, are only a piece of the growing right-wing national populist movement in Europe. The French National Front—the most popular party in France at the moment—has adopted the anti-immigrant, nationalistic approach that has characterized politics in Hungary and Poland. The Austrian Freedom Party is another example of an ultranationalist party that is gaining traction, and there are right-wing national populist parties that are part of governing coalitions in Finland, Norway, and Lithuania.<sup>4</sup>

The U.K. Independence Party, or UKIP, has a similar approach to politics and policy as its counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Despite its recent poor showing in U.K. parliamentary elections, it helped spearhead the Brexit effort to get the United Kingdom out of the European Union. UKIP interim leader Nigel Farage was one of the first leaders to meet with President-elect Trump.<sup>5</sup> Just as concerning and even more surprising is the emergence of the new nativist Alternative for Germany Party, or AfD, Party, which has won some regional elections for state parliaments, including in Saxony-Anhalt, where it won one out of every four votes cast.<sup>6</sup> Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, is another example of an ultranationalist politician who is making himself heard. To the far right is Hungary's openly anti-Semitic Jobbik Party, which is also the nation's largest opposition party, and there is the neofascist Golden Dawn Party in Greece.

The reach of populist parties in Europe varies from country to country, but over the past five years, populist parties averaged 16.5 percent of the vote in the 16 European countries holding elections, with Hungary's Fidesz Party garnering 65 percent.<sup>7</sup> The French National Front is expected to win the first round of the 2017 presidential election, and the AfD in Germany has already beaten German Prime Minister Angela Merkel's party, the Christian Democratic Union, in the Saxony-Anhalt local elections.<sup>8</sup> Yet nowhere has the right-wing national populist movement taken effect more strongly than in Hungary with Orbán and Fidesz.

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## The move away from progressive politics

The success of a right-wing national populist party in Hungary is somewhat surprising if one examines the evolution of Hungarian politics since the end of World War II. Hungary was at the vanguard of the anti-Soviet movement and the fight for freedom among Eastern European nations. The 1956 Hungarian Revolution was a symbol of Hungary's determination to build a democracy and market economy. The so-called *goulash communism* practiced in Hungary from the 1960s to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and fall of the Soviet Union is a good example of Hungary's path away from totalitarianism and toward a more open economy and society. The Hungarians tried to blend some free-market economics into their nonmarket economy, including permitting small businesses to operate, thereby setting Hungary apart from other Eastern European nations that were under Soviet control.

The Hungarians also tore down the barrier between Hungary and Austria several months before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Hungarians clearly wanted to become part of Europe, embracing Western European values and politics. Ironically, one of the political leaders of the time was Viktor Orbán, who in 1989 bravely called for a withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary when the Soviet threat was still real.<sup>9</sup> A year earlier in 1988, Orbán, along with some university classmates, founded Fidesz, or the Alliance of Young Democrats.<sup>10</sup>

Orbán and Fidesz supported open and democratic elections and a parliament. They wanted a market-based economy. They wanted to be part of Europe and to have an inclusive society. They embraced liberal ideals. Orbán wanted to be part of change in Hungary, and Fidesz was the vehicle to realize that change. Fidesz, which started as a movement, became a party with the advent of the 1990 Hungarian elections.<sup>11</sup> But over time, Orbán, who began as an idealist, gradually moved toward who he is today—a right-wing national populist whose focus is on maintaining power rather than supporting the liberal ideals he once embraced.

Fidesz partnered with a liberal party in 1990, but it went its own way in 1994 when Orbán and his colleagues saw an opening to fill a political gap caused by the failure of Hungary's conservative party, the Hungarian Democratic Forum.<sup>12</sup> This opportunistic move, ignoring past allegiance to progressive values, paved the way for Fidesz to win the 1998 elections as a right-of-center party, making Orbán prime minister. Despite a solid economic record as prime minister, Orbán lost power in 2002 and did not regain it until he won the 2010 election.<sup>13</sup> He has remained in control of the government ever since.

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## The shift to right-wing national populism

To say that Prime Minister Orbán won in 2010 because of a disenchanted voting public would not be completely accurate. Nonetheless, Hungary, similar to many European countries, was hit hard by the 2008 economic crisis. Hungary's economy shrank 7 percent in 2008, worse than most other European countries. In order to deal with the economic collapse, Hungary went to the International Monetary Fund, or IMF.<sup>14</sup> As a condition for getting IMF assistance, Hungary had to implement a very unpopular austerity plan.

The economic struggles were an opportunity for Fidesz. The party ran on a platform of raising taxes on multinational corporations operating in Hungary, calling for Hungarians to retake control of their country. Orbán also criticized the European Union, in particular its bureaucracy, and claimed Hungary was being victimized by foreigners, whether companies or bureaucrats in Brussels.<sup>15</sup>

Orbán may have run as a reformer, but learning from previous electoral defeats, he became more political operator than reformer. His brand of right-wing politics became more populist than traditional conservative. His goal is to control power, and that has meant taking steps that are in sync with European rightist politics rather than embracing the liberal roots of Fidesz.

Fidesz controlled a two-thirds majority of the parliament in 2010, which gave Orbán the opportunity to begin the process of making profound changes to the Hungarian government and political system.<sup>16</sup> He began consolidating power by attacking institutions that he believed threatened Fidesz. For example, he instituted changes to the Constitutional

Court of Hungary, the nation's highest court, in order to ensure it would not undermine his electoral grip on power.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, he established a process in which the majority party in parliament—Fidesz—could appoint judges without consulting the opposition and expanded the number of judges on the Constitutional Court from 11 to 15, packing it with Fidesz loyalists. He later amended the Hungarian Constitution so that laws previously declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court were now considered constitutional, further undermining its authority.<sup>18</sup>

Prime Minister Orbán also attacked the media. He established a commission that fines journalists for vague attacks on “human dignity”; staffed state-supported media outlets with Fidesz loyalists<sup>19</sup>; imposed regulations on media outlets that are critical of the government, while giving special rights to outlets that are supportive of the government<sup>20</sup>; and put in place a new advertising tax as a way to influence private media.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps most concerning, Orbán put Dániel Papp—a co-founder of the ultraright, anti-Semitic Jobbik Party—in charge of all content for public media.<sup>22</sup>

In 2012, he rammed a new constitution through parliament in two weeks. This new document includes pronouncements that life begins at conception and marriage can only be between a man and a woman.<sup>23</sup> The new Hungarian Constitution also institutionalizes the changes Orbán made to the judicial system, including lowering the mandatory retirement age for judges and prohibiting the Constitutional Court from challenging budget-related legislation.<sup>24</sup> He also created a National Judicial Office, staffed by a Fidesz loyalist, that has the power to pick judges.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, Orbán made sure the electoral system would work in favor of Fidesz. He used gerrymandering to create a favorable political environment and passed laws that allow Hungarians abroad to get Hungarian passports and vote in Hungarian elections, which helped gain support for Fidesz in the 2014 election.<sup>26</sup> These moves were aimed at making sure Orbán and Fidesz maintain power.

Orbán's actions have also undermined civil society. For example, he has investigated academics who are critical of his government.<sup>27</sup> He put a party member in charge of the National Cultural Fund, which provides funding for the arts and has always been independent.<sup>28</sup> He has been highly critical of Hungarian-American philanthropist and civil-society supporter George Soros, saying he is fostering chaos in Hungary by funding nongovernmental organizations.<sup>29</sup> In 2011, a number of European intellectuals and others—including the late former Czech President Václav Havel—published an open letter that criticized the Hungarian government's misuse of power, such as the elimination of checks and balances.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Orbán has expressed interest in possibly getting back territory that historically belonged to Hungary. While it is unrealistic for him to assume this is feasible, his rhetoric on this and other issues is similar to that of Russian President Vladimir

Putin. For example, Orbán suggests about Hungary, as Putin does about Russia, that the Hungarian nation does not end with present borders of the state. It ends with Hungarians who were “stranded” elsewhere in Europe, such as in Romania and Serbia.<sup>31</sup> Putin expresses similar sentiments to ethnic Russians living outside of Russia.<sup>32</sup>

Orbán moved further to the right in 2014 because of the political threat of the ultraright party, Jobbik. While Jobbik received 17 percent of the vote in the 2010 Hungarian parliamentary elections, that increased to 20.54 percent in the 2014 Hungarian elections—making it all the more formidable—although Jobbik lost support in the European parliamentary elections shortly after the 2014 Hungarian parliamentary elections.<sup>33</sup> Because Fidesz and Orbán are about politics not policy and because Jobbik was gaining overall in popularity, Fidesz adopted much of Jobbik’s platform, including requiring that the Hungarian National Core Curriculum recommend the works of anti-Semitic writers and that the public media promote a national Hungarian identity.<sup>34</sup> Fidesz also expressed support for Hungarian militias, kicked the IMF out of Hungary, and adopted other unorthodox policies that were financially unsound but politically popular.<sup>35</sup>

As the refugee crisis became more of a pressing issue for the European Union, including in Hungary, Orbán put himself and Fidesz at the forefront of the European anti-refugee movement. Orbán called refugees “rapists, criminals, and terrorists,”<sup>36</sup> and the government declared it would build a 100-mile fence along its Serbian border.<sup>37</sup> Orbán pushed refugees into decrepit camps, shooting water and tear gas at others.<sup>38</sup> He argued with EU officials about accepting quotas of refugees and declared that his government is for the Hungarian people while the opposition represents foreign interests. After the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* terrorist attacks in Paris, Orbán said, “We do not want to see a significant minority among ourselves that has different cultural characteristics and background. We would like to keep Hungary as Hungary”—a not-so-subtle attack on Muslims.<sup>39</sup>

It is ironic that Orbán has taken on a leading role in the anti-refugee, anti-immigrant movement. Hungary’s foreign-born population was reported to be only 4.5 percent in 2014, and most were Hungarians who were born outside of Hungary. Germany, which is much more hospitable to refugees and immigrants, has a foreign-born population of more than 12 percent.<sup>40</sup>

Orbán has expressed admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Erdoğan. His rhetoric is decidedly anti-elite, anti-liberal, and at times, anti-European Union. He has an us-versus-them approach to politics, denouncing political correctness, and has called those who oppose him elites who are out of touch with the people.<sup>41</sup> He rewards loyalty and cronyism rather than competence when making appointments and running the government.<sup>42</sup>

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## Orbán, Fidesz, and the politics of power

Prime Minister Orbán's popularity has been generally strong. He secured a two-thirds majority in parliament in 2010, enabling him to push through draconian, anti-liberal measures.<sup>43</sup> Fidesz saw its popularity grow considerably starting in September 2015 after Orbán put up the fence to keep refugees out. But in February 2016, its approval rating dropped from 53 percent to 46 percent in the space of a month.<sup>44</sup> This drop was likely the result of a number of factors, including waning concern over the refugee issue and problems with teachers over an effort to centralize education. Nearly 25,000 teachers walked off the job this year. The state employs 140,000 teachers and other school workers, so the teachers' protest against Orbán's government is a serious political threat; while Fidesz saw its popularity dwindle, public support for the teachers was 76 percent.<sup>45</sup>

Fidesz is not in imminent danger of losing power. This is due primarily to two factors: problems among the opposition parties and voter apathy. The opposition is divided and disorganized. A coalition of liberal parties that were part of previous Hungarian governments only managed 19 percent of the vote in 2014 compared to Jobbik's 20 percent, making it the largest opposition party. Timea Szabó, a member of the liberal Dialogue for Hungary Party, summed up the problem, "We knew back in 2010 that there would be major disagreements with the government, but not in our wildest nightmares did we imagine that Fidesz would start demolishing democratic institutions and start installing its cronies."<sup>46</sup>

As for voter apathy, a recent poll in Hungary found that 84 percent of the people who want to see Fidesz out of power said they would not bother to vote.<sup>47</sup> Hungarian sociologist Borbala Kriza believes young people in Hungary "are either completely apolitical or are active in the far right. ... The far right has been able to not just build a party, Jobbik, but also a political subculture."<sup>48</sup> Whether or not this is an accurate reflection of all of Hungary's youth culture, it is an indication of a problem that must be addressed in the political fight against Fidesz and Jobbik.

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## A push against right-wing national populism

The rise of populism is a function of a variety of factors—some economic, some political, some social, and some based on security concerns. The idea of globalization is anathema to populists. They stoke the fear that the loss of homogeneity in countries is a threat that must be dealt with. Weak economic growth makes that concern, however unrealistic, palpable. Terrorist attacks, particularly in Europe, make the fear of foreigners, especially Muslims, more acute. It is clear that the populism of Prime Minister Orbán and others in Europe threatens liberal democracy.

In the case of Hungary and Poland, the European Union can take action and exert pressure. Orbán's Hungary-first<sup>49</sup> approach and Kaczyński and PiS's heavy-handed political grab in Poland have put them at odds with the European Union, which has expressed its discontent at their autocratic, populist tendencies. In 2014, the European Union passed the Rule of Law Framework, which allows it to assess the threat to the rule of law in a member state.<sup>50</sup> This precedes the imposition of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, which is the political "nuclear option," allowing the European Union to suspend voting rights and impose sanctions on a member state if that state is in breach of EU fundamental values.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the European Commission, the European Union's executive body, has threatened to take action against Poland if it does not remedy the situation.<sup>52</sup>

The economic relationship between these two countries and the other EU members provides the European Union with some leverage over Hungary, Poland, and other EU members that want to follow their political path. This is a limited tool, however. There needs to be a broader approach to address the concerns of those who support populists such as Orbán. It can be done by refocusing economic policies on inclusive growth and by making sure that international economic integration is seen as beneficial and an engine of job creation, not as a formula for losing jobs and diminishing economic opportunity.

The first step in pushing back against Orbán and those who think like him must be to realize that right-wing, nationalist populism that scapegoats others and is illiberal and exclusive must be responded to directly and forcefully. This kind of disturbing political movement can happen to any country, and it is worth remembering that Orbán the liberal became Orbán the right-wing nationalist populist. He was elected because, in the words of Ágnes Heller, a Hungarian professor persecuted by Orbán's government, "If people feel themselves betrayed by the republic, then they turn to the strong man who will solve all their problems."<sup>53</sup>

Orbán's real success is his focus on politics rather than policy. He has manipulated the system, and he has a base of consistent support. That is not to say there is no opposition to Orbán. There is, but that opposition is tainted both by disorganization and a lack of interest in the democratic process.

There are some obvious comparisons between things Prime Minister Orbán has said and done and rhetoric from President-elect Trump's campaign during the election. For example, Trump made anti-immigrant comments, calling Mexicans "rapists" and criminals,<sup>54</sup> and proposed building a wall, similar to Orbán's fence, to keep immigrants out.<sup>55</sup> He regularly criticized the media as biased in support of the other party<sup>56</sup> and said that Muslims pose a threat to Americans.<sup>57</sup> He attacked U.S. institutions, such as the electoral college and those responsible for overseeing state electoral systems.<sup>58</sup> And Trump praised Russian President Vladimir Putin<sup>59</sup> and questioned claims from the U.S. intelligence community that the Russians were interfering with the election.<sup>60</sup>

Rhetoric is one thing, and action is another. There can be no success against Orbán or anyone like him if those who oppose him are not willing to stand up to him and challenge changes that could undermine democratic institutions. Democratic institutions can only survive if threats are met with challenges from those who believe in and cherish them. Progressives must unite and work with others to question changes that undermine democracy and support the rights of all people, regardless of who they are or what they believe.

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