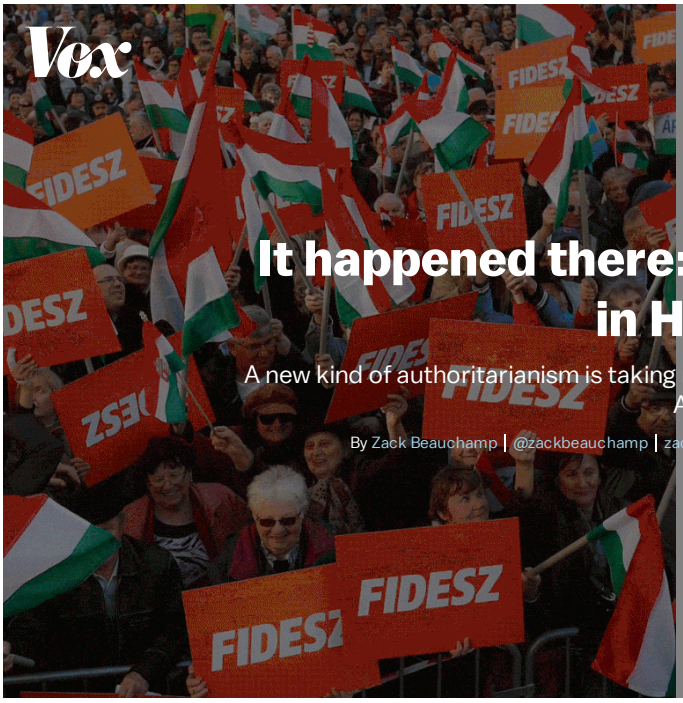


It happened there: how democracy died in Hungary

A new kind of authoritarianism is taking root in Europe â and there are warning signs for America.

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This project was sponsored by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. | Image Credit: Javier Zarracina/Vox

The Hungary-Serbia border runs through a wilderness, tall grass flatlands ringed by imposing clusters of trees and thickets. When I visited a stretch of the Serbian side on a sunny day in June, the landscape would have been lovely â had it not been for the gigantic barbed-wire fence running straight through the middle of it.

The border fence had been built three years earlier on the Hungarian side, by the order of Prime Minister Viktor OrbÃĄn, who had sold it to the public as Hungaryâs first line of defense against an âinvasionâ of asylum seekers during a massive surge in migration to Europe from conflict-ridden countries in 2015. Two years later, he **sent a bill** for the fenceâs construction cost to Brussels, suggesting the European Union should repay Hungary for âprotecting all the citizens of Europe from the flood of illegal migrants.â

My translator MatÃŠ and I had abandoned our bug-covered car in a thicket on the way to the fence and trekked through the countryside on foot. We came across a clearing where two Afghan boys, Hashmat and Faiz, were living in a small, filthy tent on the Serbian side of the border. The Hungarian government employed them as translators for interviews of other asylum seekers. Though few cross the border into Hungary anymore, Hashmat and Faiz still live just outside the fence to be on call for the border authorities.



Hashmat (L) and Faiz when I met them outside their living quarters in June. | Zack Beauchamp/Vox

âEvery night, raining. Every night, big problem here,â Hashmat told me.

Fear of refugees like these two had prompted the Hungarian government to go to extreme lengths to keep them out. The once-sleepy border with Serbia was militarized, with cameras and border police patrolling the length of it.

On the way back to our car, MatÃŠ and I saw a Hungarian police car pull up beside the fence. The officer got out and started yelling. MatÃŠ translated, explaining that the guard wanted me to stop taking pictures of the fence.

This kind of thing can happen to journalists at heavily policed borders. But this time, the guard asked something curious: Did we have a permit to be reporting here? This was not a requirement youâd expect in a European democracy; Hungary even has constitutional protections for the free press. I asked MatÃŠ about this; he said the permit was a requirement for taking photos of the fence â but if we had applied for one, it would have taken forever to be processed or simply been denied.

We stopped talking, got into our car, and drove off, a border guard vehicle trailing us from across the fence the whole way out.

This is the way things are in Hungary, a landlocked country of 10 million people sandwiched between Austria, Romania, and Ukraine (among other countries). To outsiders, it looks and feels like any modern European nation. The capital, Budapest, boasts both beautiful classical architecture and one of Europeâs most exciting party scenes.



Javier Zarracina/Vox

When I was there, as part of a project supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, Budapest was in the midst of several by-election campaigns for local office; the city was drowning in campaign posters, as if desperately trying to convince visitors that Hungarian democracy was alive and well.

But the true face of modern Hungary isnât gleaming Budapest. Itâs the immense security apparatus at the border â the barbed-wire fence, the refugee boys sleeping in the dirt, the border guard making trouble for journalists â that reveals the very modern kind of authoritarian state Hungary has become.

Over the course of his eight years in power, Prime Minister OrbÃ¡n has chipped away at the foundations of Hungarian democracy. It has been replaced with an authoritarian regime that wields a cynical interpretation of the law as a weapon; the country is governed by rules like the border journalism permits, regulations that can seem reasonable on their face but

actually serve to undermine essential democratic freedoms.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor OrbÃĄn. | NurPhoto/Getty Images

Elections there are free, in the sense that the vote counts arenât nakedly rigged. But they are unfair: The government controls the airwaves and media companies to such a degree that the opposition canât get a fair hearing. OrbÃĄnâs party, Fidesz, **stands up bogus opposition parties** during parliamentary elections as a means of dividing the anti-Fidesz vote. In April 2018, Fidesz won the national elections, cementing OrbÃĄnâs hold on power; **international monitors concluded** that the opposition never really had a fair chance.

Hungaryâs civil society looks free and vibrant on paper, but a patchwork of nonsensical regulations makes it nearly impossible for pro-democracy organizations to do their work. The economy seems to be growing, but a significant number of corporations are controlled by OrbÃĄnâs cronies.

An unending drumbeat of propaganda, from both official state outlets and the private media empires of OrbÃĄn allies, demonizes refugees and Muslims, warning of an existential threat to Hungarian society and culture â and touting the OrbÃĄn regime as the only thing protecting the country from an Islamic takeover. This trumped-up crisis serves as a legitimation tool for Fideszâs authoritarianism, a pretext for the government to pass laws undermining its opponents.

Call it âsoft fascismâ: a political system that aims to stamp out dissent and seize control of every major aspect of a countryâs political and social life, without needing to resort to âhardâ measures like banning elections and building up a police state.

One of the most disconcerting parts of observing Hungarian soft fascism up close is that itâs easy to imagine the model being exported. While the OrbÃĄn regime grew out of Hungaryâs unique history and political culture, its playbook for subtle repression could in theory be run in any democratic country whose leaders have had enough of the political opposition.

Itâs not for nothing that **Steve Bannon**, who has called OrbÃĄn âthe most significant guy on the scene right now,â is currently in Europe building an organization â called âthe Movementâ â aimed at spreading OrbÃĄnâs populist politics across the continent.

European leaders have only recently woken up to the threat Hungary poses; the **European Parliament** voted on Tuesday to label OrbÃĄnâs government a âsystemic threat to the rule of law.â But this is likely too little, too late: OrbÃĄn has consolidated his power, and the opposition is too weak and divided to pose a major threat in the foreseeable future.

Hungary is a warning of what could happen when a ruthless, anti-minority populist backed by a major political party is allowed to govern unchecked. Americans need to pay attention.



The Hungarian parliament in Budapest. | Ullstein Bild/Getty Images

How soft fascism works

Walking around downtown Budapest feels like rocketing through history. The cityâs central business district, on the east side of the Danube river, is littered with statues commemorating various kings and conflicts. The Hungarian parliament building is a massive, cathedral-like edifice built during the Austro-Hungarian Empire; right next to it are two metal plates riddled with bullet holes, a memorial commemorating the failed 1956 popular uprising against communist rule.

I met Zsuzsanna SzelÃŠnyi, a member of the Hungarian parliament who had recently left office, at an outdoor cafe on a tree-lined boulevard not far from where she used to work. SzelÃŠnyi, a political independent, had a firsthand view of some of this history: She got into politics as a pro-democracy activist in the late 1980s, during the death throes of Hungarian communism. She worked hand in hand with another young activist, Viktor OrbÃĄn, as part of Fidesz â which was then an anti-communist youth activist group. At the time of the communist regimeâs fall, in 1989, she counted him as a valuable ally.

âHe was always good in knowing what the moment requires,â she recalled. âAt the regime change, when we were working together, he was a liberal â because that was the zeitgeist.â

SzelÃŠnyi was elected to parliament in Hungaryâs first post-communist elections in 1990, as part of the Fidesz ticket. But she left the party in 1994, as OrbÃĄn seized total control of the partyâs internal decision-making and shifted its ideology to the right. SzelÃŠnyi, now a 51-year-old political veteran, says that being in parliament for the past few years had been a frustrating and pointless exercise. The futility of it all finally forced her out of government.

âHungary is not a democracy anymore,â she told me. âThe parliament is a decoration for a one-party state.â

SzelÃŠnyi offered these opinions without hesitation or fear of reprisal. We were out in public, sitting at an outdoor cafe packed with Hungarians eating brunch, and there was none of the fear that you might expect in a conventional dictatorship.

Thatâs because authoritarianism in modern Hungary is a much subtler beast, one that came on quietly and relatively recently.



A Hungarian parliament session. | Laszlo Balogh/Getty Images

For roughly the first two decades of Hungaryâs post-communist history, from 1990 to 2010, Hungary was a young but stable democracy. International observers touted it as a model of a successful transition from authoritarianism to democracy. When OrbÃĄn was elected prime minister the first time, in 1998, he governed as a relatively conventional European conservative; when Fidesz lost the 2002 elections, a new prime minister from the rival Socialist party took over.

But though OrbÃĄn stepped aside, he and his followers never really accepted the 2002 defeat as legitimate. Immediately after the results were announced, Fidesz spokespeople accused their opponents of election fraud. In interviews, OrbÃĄn blamed the defeat on the **lack of Fidesz-friendly media outlets** that were parroting his partyâs message.

The 2002 defeat seemed to spark a dramatic change in the Fidesz leader. In opposition, he launched a nationalist movement to support Fidesz called âForward, Hungary.â A second electoral loss for the party in 2006 only accelerated the shift. In a now-famous 2009 speech, delivered at a closed-door party meeting, OrbÃĄn touted the need for political stability in Hungary, calling for the creation of a â**central political forcefield**â that would govern the country for up to 20 years.

In 2010, he got a chance to turn this vision into reality. That year, Fidesz won a âconstitutional majorityâ â winning 263 seats, just over the two-thirds margin necessary to rewrite the constitution by parliamentary vote.

Fideszâs victory was **widely seen** as more a product of general anti-establishment sentiment â the Socialist party had been in power during the 2008 financial crash and was plagued by corruption scandals â than a vote for OrbÃĄnâs agenda.

Regardless, the Fidesz constitutional majority swiftly went to work, rewriting parts of the constitution **within months of taking power**. Parliamentary districts were redrawn and **gerrymandered to give Fidesz a leg up**. Liberal bastions, principally large cities like Budapest and Szeged in the south, were divided so that large numbers of people were packed into a handful of parliamentary districts, while each district in Hungaryâs conservative countryside had fewer people in it.

The new constitution also expanded the size of the countryâs constitutional court, which decides whether laws passed by parliament are constitutional. OrbÃĄn filled the new seats with Fidesz loyalists. All judges over the age of 62 were also forced to retire, so their seats could be filled with even more Fidesz-friendly jurists.

The constitutional changes were supplemented by legislation expanding the scope of Fideszâs authority. Civil servants were fired en masse, and Fidesz allies were installed in vital roles, like election supervision. Hungaryâs state broadcaster was brought under the control of a new media board â and its editorial slant began to mirror Fideszâs positions.

SzelÃŠnyi at the time was working for the Budapest office of the Council of Europe, an international human rights watchdog. She says most observers didnât understand what OrbÃĄn was up to until it was too late.

âHe benefited from the supermajority so quickly that no one really realizedâ what happened, she explains. âWe could follow this in Hungary, but I think Europe only opened their eyes in 2015. Five years later, they understood who this person was. But by that time, Hungary was completely changed.â

Private media was a principal target of the Fidesz power grab. After the 2010 victory, the Fidesz government used the power of the state to pressure private media corporations to sell to the state or to oligarchs aligned with Fidesz. **Tactics included** withholding government advertising dollars, selectively blocking mergers that would allow outlets to expand, and imposing punitive taxes on ad revenue.

By 2017, **90 percent of all media** in Hungary was owned by either the state or a Fidesz ally, according to a count by Budapest-based scholar Marius Dragomir. This media empire includes every single regional newspaper in the country.

Fidesz also worked to reshape the electorate itself. A 2010 law granted citizenship rights to ethnic Hungarians in nearby countries like Romania, including the ability to vote and to access Hungarian social benefit payments. Though many of these ethnic Hungarians have never set foot in Hungary, more than a million non-domestic Hungarians have signed up for the citizenship program. They currently make up about 10 percent of the electorate and are largely on board with OrbÃĄnâs right-nationalist agenda, voting for Fidesz at an astonishing **95 percent rate**.

Some of these actions have been even shadier. In the past two elections, for example, Fidesz helped create several fake parties â including one party that was being run by someone who turned out to be homeless â that got on the ballot using **signatures of Fidesz supporters and dead people.** These parties split the anti-Fidesz vote in competitive districts, making it much easier for the Fidesz candidate to win a plurality.

None of these tactics, on their own, formally ended Hungarian democracy. But combined, they effectively rigged the political system to give Fidesz a nigh-insurmountable edge.

In Budapestâs gentrifying Eighth District, I visited a bar and social club called AurÃłra. Started as a space for secular Jewish cultural life, it had turned into a sort of hub for left-wing and pro-democracy organizing. Budapestâs Pride March had its offices there, as did one of Hungaryâs few remaining investigative journalism outlets.



The scene at AurÃłra during my visit. | Zack Beauchamp/Vox

There, I met PÃŠter GyÍri, an opposition candidate for local office: the Eighth Districtâs âmayoralty.â GyÍri, an older man with a dignified salt-and-pepper mustache, had been

meeting with allies and supporters at AurÄłra.

Despite having made it through communism, and the fact that he was now participating in a democratic election with the backing of several opposition parties, GyĹri was not optimistic about Hungarian politics. âThere is no democracy at all,â he said flatly. âBy any standard, there is an autocracy in this country.â



Peter GyĹri in the bar-lounge area at AurÄłra. | Zack Beauchamp/Vox

GyĹriâs own race proved him right. During the campaign, the government-run local newspaper printed **nearly two dozen positive articles** about his Fidesz opponent, Botond SÄĄra. The same paper denied GyĹri the opportunity to run a single ad; the **Hungarian Free Press** website reports that he was told âthe paper did not accept political ads.â GyĹri could not win this uphill battle; SÄĄra trounced him in the July election by a 63-36 margin.

AurÄłra is now fighting to keep its doors open. After I left Budapest, the Fidesz-controlled local government ordered its closure on **health and safety grounds**.



The Shoes on the Danube, a Budapest Holocaust memorial marking the mass execution of the cityâs Jews on the riverbank. | Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images

âThis place is closing downâ

The Danube river splits Budapest into two halves: Buda and Pest. The Pest side, on the east side of the river, is where most of the office buildings and nightlife are. Thatâs where you can find parliament and the party district that attracts so many tourists. Buda, the western half, is traditionally wealthier and more residential. Marked by many green spaces and rolling hills, it can be a stark contrast to the flat urbanity that characterizes much of Pest.

Youâd think that the Buda office of a successful Hungarian corporation would radiate a sense

of power: looking out over the city, confident in its wealth. But the one I visited felt less like Wall Street and more like the site of a wake. One of the companyâs founders, who asked to remain anonymous out of fear of retaliation, explained why: The OrbÃĄn regime had just shaken them down, using mafia-like tactics to seize control of the corporation.

The founder explained that he had recently received a phone call from a government official, one whose office had nothing to do with the business in question, who had âheardâ the manâs corporation was for sale. This was news to the businessman: âWe werenât planning to sell,â he told me.

But the government wanted his company as a way to gain access to a new stream of EU funding the state coveted. Anyone familiar with the way business in Hungary worked, the business executive said, would understand that the phone call was an implicit threat. He could either sell his company, and abandon something heâd spent years building, or watch helplessly as the government choked it to death with taxes and regulations.

âAnybody who has a conflict with any of [OrbÃĄnâs] boys, they will get the tax agency within weeks â for many weeks,â he says. âWe werenât *forced* to sell; we just werenât allowed to win.â

So he sold his company to a major state-run enterprise. He has since moved his family out of Hungary, elsewhere in Europe â hopefully putting them outside of Fideszâs reach.

âThis placeâ â meaning Hungary â âis closing down,â he says. â[My] kids will be doing great in a real, free European country.â

This kind of corruption is a defining feature of Hungaryâs soft fascism. Unsatisfied with merely making elections unfair, OrbÃĄn and Fidesz have turned the stateâs power over commerce into an effective tool of social control.

The stateâs economic policies are cleverly designed both to enrich OrbÃĄnâs allies and to neutralize potential threats to their hold on power. Fidesz watches Hungaryâs business community closely because theyâre the people who could finance an anti-government uprising, and punishes those it sees as potentially serious threats.

Few wealthy Hungarians are willing to risk their fortunes by challenging OrbÃĄn. And without access to an independent source of funding, itâs difficult for anyone to create a political force strong enough to challenge Fideszâs hegemony.



OrbÃĄn making a campaign speech in August 2018. | AFP/Getty Images

Corruption was a longstanding problem in Hungary prior to OrbÃĄn; in fact, corruption scandals helped propel Fidesz to its first two-thirds majority back in 2010. But the evidence suggests that it has become more commonplace and systematic since then, to the point that leading Hungarian and international experts have labeled the post-2010 Fidesz regime a **âkleptocracyâ** â that is, a government whose central aim is stealing from its citizens to

enrich its leaders.

One of the best ways to understand how this works is to look at the way the government gives out contracts. Most liberal democracies have open and transparent bidding and grant processes. But in Hungary, things work a little bit differently.

A statistical analysis by IstvÃĄn JÃĄnos TÃłth and MiklÃłs Hajdu, two scholars at **the Corruption Research Center in Budapest**, examined more than 126,000 government contracts issued by the OrbÃĄn government from 2010 to 2016. Specifically, they looked to see whether contracts issued to companies owned by four hyper-wealthy men in particular â all current or former OrbÃĄn allies â differed from those issued to Hungarian firms without such connections.

What they found was striking. Contracts awarded to the four men were disproportionately likely to be awarded without a bidding process, and the companies were particularly likely to receive EU funds, over which the government exercises tight control.

LÁrinc MÃŠszarÃłs, one of the four men the study looked at and a childhood friend of OrbÃĄnâs, trained professionally as a gas technician. In 2009, he was not a particularly wealthy man. But under the OrbÃĄn government, he managed to build up a wide-ranging business empire on the basis of these government contracts. By 2017, he was the **eighth-richest man** in Hungary, with a fortune of roughly $392 million.

âThe fact that Iâve made it to this point can surely be attributed to the roles played by God, luck and Viktor OrbÃĄn,â MÃŠszÃĄros said in a **2014 interview** with a pro-Fidesz newspaper.

MÃŠszarÃłs is perhaps the clearest example of how Hungarians can flourish simply by getting on Orbanâs good side. The case of Lajos Simicska, another of the men in the above study, illustrates what happens to Hungaryâs oligarchs if they cross him.

Simicska, OrbÃĄnâs college roommate and a founding member of Fidesz, had amassed a media and construction empire based largely on government ad revenue and contracts. He played an essential part in the prime ministerâs rise to power, helping him build up the media infrastructure that allows Fidesz to so profoundly control public opinion.

But the two men eventually had a very public falling-out. In a 2015 interview, Simicska referred to OrbÃĄn as âgeci,â a Hungarian word that literally translates as âsemenâ but is used as a fairly nasty insult. Soon after, the government money that had kept Simicskaâs business empire afloat suddenly stopped flowing in. He fell from No. 6 on the richest Hungarians list in 2015 to **No. 21 in 2017**.

The remainders of Simicskaâs media empire attacked OrbÃĄn bitterly in the 2018 campaign, trying to build up the far-right Jobbik party as an alternative. This effort failed, and Fidesz this April won its third consecutive two-thirds majority (despite getting roughly 49 percent of the total vote).

In the months following the election, four of Simicskaâs remaining media outlets were either shut down or taken over by the government. Hir TV, a Simicska-controlled channel, was taken over and turned into a government propaganda outlet in August. âThereâs no point being a journalist in this country any more,â BalÃĄzs LÃĄng, a news producer at Hir, told **the Guardian** after the takeover. He said he planned to quit in protest.

Simicskaâs vast business empire has collapsed into ruins. In July, he announced plans to sell off what remains of his business interests to **one of his partners**.

The lesson is clear: Nobody, from ordinary businesspeople all the way up to the top oligarchs like Simicska, can survive without OrbÃĄnâs favor.



An anti-OrbÃ‰n sign outside Hungaryâs parliament in May, put up during protests against his reelection in May. | Attila Kisbenedek/AFP/Getty Images

âThey made a dumpster out of the whole townâ

Several hours after MatÃŠ and I had our run-in with the border police, we crossed back over the Serbian border into Hungary. We decided to get outside of what Hungarians call the âBudapest bubbleâ and visit Fideszâs political strongholds in the more rural parts of Hungary.

Our first stop was RÃśszke, a border town of 3,300 people where cars share the road with horse-drawn carts. The townâs central square is dominated by a building with bright yellow walls, home to a cafe that seemed to be a popular spot for locals.

We told LÃ‰szlo, the middle-aged cafe worker with a dimpled smile, that we were journalists from out of town; afterward, he insisted on serving us lemonades and pastries on the house.



A scene in RÃśszke. | Zack Beauchamp/Vox

But when we asked LÃ‰szlo about the refugees who had been coming to RÃśszke from Serbia in large numbers in 2015, he sounded a lot less welcoming.

âThey made a dumpster out of the whole town,â he said. âWe didnât know with what cause they came here ... they could have done anything to us.â

This attitude was common among RÃśszke residents I spoke to, most of whom said theyâd felt a deep sense of fear and unease back in 2015, when migrants were crossing over in large numbers. No one pointed to actual crimes committed by migrants beyond littering, venting instead about their general sense that the migrants were dirty and scary.

Many Hungarians, and Europeans as a whole, hold similar views. The response to the migrant crisis of 2015 was a **dramatic rise in xenophobia and support for far-right parties**. The difference between Hungary and most other EU countries is that at the time of the crisis,

Hungaryâs government had already been captured by a far-right party â one that was more than willing to stoke anti-immigrant sentiment for political gain.

Today, anti-migrant demagoguery has become the very core of Fideszâs political ideology. This is a key reason the party remains popular with so many ordinary Hungarians: It has created a sense of perpetual crisis, warning Hungarians that Viktor OrbÃĄn is the only person standing between them and a hostile Muslim invasion.

Hungary does not have a particularly large immigrant population. **Only 5.2 percent** of Hungarian residents are foreign-born, the seventh-lowest percentage out of the 28 EU countries. Yet owing to geography â Hungary is the first EU country on what **was once a common migration route** from the Middle East and South Asia â migrants often made it their first stop on their way to another EU destination.

So when mass migration to Europe surged in 2015 because of conflict in places like Syria and Afghanistan, Hungarians felt like their countryâs demographics were changing fast. In a late 2015 Eurobarometer poll, **68 percent** of Hungarians saw immigration as one of the top two issues facing the EU, up from just **19 percent** a year earlier.



Migrants on their way to Hungary from Serbia in 2016. | Getty Images

OrbÃĄn saw a political opportunity in rising public anxiety about migration. His rhetoric began to focus almost monomaniacally on migrants and the threat Muslim immigration posed to Europeâs Christian identity and culture. He **blamed the migration** on German Chancellor Angela Merkel â who insisted on keeping Europeâs doors open to asylum seekers â and vowed to fight for European sovereignty against Merkelâs âopen bordersâ approach.

He paired this heated rhetoric with concrete action. In late 2015, when Donald Trump was still considered a joke candidate by many, OrbÃĄn built a fence to keep out migrants â the same fence MatÃŠ and I visited. And OrbÃĄn got results: The number of migrants seeking asylum in Hungary plummeted from **177,000 in 2015 to 29,000 in 2016**. Very few have permanently settled in Hungary. Most RÃśszke residents told me they hadnât seen a migrant in years.

But while Hungary no longer faces a large influx of refugees, OrbÃĄn hasnât slowed down the anti-migrant rhetoric. If anything, heâs stepped it up. Billboards around the country hyped up fears of âillegal migrationâ during the 2018 election. Fideszâs media outlets relentlessly cover reports of migrant crime and violence in Hungary and other European countries.



A government-sponsored anti-migrant poster next to a campaign ad for OrbÃĄnâs 2018 reelection bid. | NurPhoto/Getty Images

In one particularly grotesque example earlier this year, a Fidesz member of parliament named JÃĄnos LÃĄzÃĄr released a **short video** featuring footage from a recent trip to Vienna, which features extended shots of nonwhite migrants and a series of (false) allegations from LÃĄzÃĄr about how theyâre destroying the once-lovely city.

âEvidently the streets are dirtier; evidently the area is poorer and thereâs lots more crime,â he says in the video, which was **briefly banned by Facebook** for violating the siteâs hate speech guidelines. âIf we let them in [to Hungary] and they live in our cities, the consequences will be crime, impoverishment, dirt and grime, and impossible urban conditions.â

Fideszâs anti-migrant rhetoric is working. The most recent Eurobarometer poll, from March 2018, found that **56 percent of Hungarians** considered migration a top issue for the EU today, similar numbers as in 2015 despite the fact that the number of asylum seekers crossing the Serbian border has dwindled to a scant **two per day**.

A 2016 **Pew poll** found that 72 percent of Hungarians have a negative view of Muslims, a figure two-thirds larger than the European average (43 percent). Another **Pew poll** from June found that well over twice as many Hungarians thought rising diversity made their country âa worse place to liveâ as those who thought it made Hungary better.

Hungarians arenât uniquely xenophobic by European standards. Across the continent, politicians like OrbÃĄn have ridden anti-migrant sentiment to political power. The current Austrian chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, campaigned on an **immigration platform** similar to OrbÃĄnâs; Italyâs Deputy Prime Minister **Matteo Salvini** has called for a street-by-street âmass cleansingâ of undocumented migrants. **Polish President Andrzej Duda** has blamed migrants for terrorist attacks and decried the âfar-reaching political correctnessâ of Europeans who refuse to do the same.

What separates Hungary from the rest is that OrbÃĄn already had established an illiberal government when the refugee crisis began. His control over the media, together with the complete marginalization of opposition groups, allowed him to manipulate anti-migrant sentiment more effectively and get the population on board with the Fidesz regime.

He has also used that demagoguery as a pretext for cracking down on political opponents. Nowhere is this clearer than in Fideszâs treatment of George Soros, a Hungarian-American billionaire and the premier funder of pro-democracy work in Hungary.

Soros, who is Jewish and a Holocaust survivor, is controversial in the United States as well: Heâs a major Democratic donor who has been accused by figures like **Glenn Beck** and **Tucker Carlson** of being the âpuppet masterâ (in Beckâs words) behind a conspiracy to weaken and transform the United States. Outside of the United States, Sorosâs Open Society Foundations plays a major role in supporting civil liberties and human rights groups;

the goal of the organization is explicitly to **promote democracy and freedom globally**.

Back in his dissident days, OrbÃĄn had received Soros funding **to do research on promoting civil society**. But now, Sorosâs work is a clear and present threat to his grip on power. Hungarian state propaganda has basically taken up a version of the American right-wing âpuppet masterâ line, accusing Soros of secretly funding the migration wave as part of a plot to undermine Hungaryâs Christian identity. The organizations he supports, which range from **a migrant legal aid organization** to **anti-poverty charities** to **one of Hungaryâs most important universities**, are under threat.



An anti-Soros poster in Hungary. The caption reads, âNational consultation about Sorosâs plan â donât let it pass without any words!â | AFP/Getty Images

In the runup to the 2018 parliamentary elections, **Fidesz blanketed the country in huge posters** featuring Sorosâs grinning face, with captions like â99 percent reject illegal immigrationâ and âDonât let Soros have the last laugh.â In **one campaign speech**, OrbÃĄn described migration as an existential threat and blamed it on Soros. The language he used to describe the conspiracy supposedly led by his former benefactor barely concealed its anti-Semitism:

> We are fighting an enemy that is different from us. Not open, but hiding; not straightforward but crafty; not honest but base; not national but international; does not believe in working but speculates with money; does not have its own homeland but feels it owns the whole world.

In May, the Open Society Foundations was forced to close its Budapest offices. **Its president**, Patrick Gaspard, explained at the time that it was âimpossible to protect the security of our operations and our staff in Hungary from arbitrary government interference.â

The following month, Hungaryâs parliament passed a so-called â**Stop Soros**â law that creates a new category of crime â âpromoting and supporting illegal migrationâ â that could in theory be used to imprison Hungarians who provide humanitarian aid to undocumented migrants.

Despite these hurdles to civil society, there are still some in Hungary trying to organize popular resistance to OrbÃĄn. I met Gergely Homonnay, an excitable activist in his 40s who claims to have â**the most famous cat in Hungary**,â at a restaurant in central Budapest.

Over a traditional Hungarian meal featuring peppers and poppyseed pastries, he explained that politics had forced him out of his beloved profession â high school foreign language teacher â this January. Fidesz had reshaped the curriculum, he said, to deemphasize critical thinking and other skills that might lead students to question the governmentâs narratives.

âI think all the teachers in Hungary should quit,â Homonnay told me.

He was so appalled by Fideszâs sweeping victory in the April election that he joined an effort

to organize mass protests, one that culminated in several rallies in Budapest involving **tens of thousands of Hungarians**.

But the ultimate goal wasnât to conduct a few protests, as big as those were. The real ambition, he said, was to build the foundations of a sustained resistance movement that could circumvent the ineffectual opposition and reenergize Hungarian democracy.

Homonnay acknowledged the main challenge facing the resistance: âWe do not have enough supporters.â



A scene from one of the post-election rallies Homonnay helped organize. | AFP/Getty Images

Getting people out on the streets in left-leaning Budapest is one thing; organizing a nationwide campaign that includes the more conservative-leaning, rural parts of the country that actually like OrbÄąn is another. These rural voters seemed to genuinely believe that migration is still a serious problem; several told me they voted for OrbÄąn because of it.

The Fidesz media apparatus is also actively working to discredit activists like Homonnay. A pro-government TV outlet ran a segment in August trying to embarrass Homonnay by **publishing images** from his private Facebook account of his travels abroad. The goal was to cast him as a hypocrite by contrasting his rally speeches about inequality in Hungary with his globetrotting.

Homonnayâs current plan is to launch an independent news website â he aims to go live this month â and eventually expand it into a daily newspaper. The idea, he told me, is to directly reach the rural audiences that currently constitute Fideszâs hardcore base of support. âWe need to open the peopleâs eyes: This is not how a European democracy should work,â he said.

But he understands what heâs up against. Changing Hungarian public opinion with a newspaper â one the government would almost certainly attempt to marginalize or shut down â is a very tall order. Like the other Hungarian dissidents I met, Homonnay recognizes that defeat is extremely likely.

âThe sad thing,â he said, âis that the government can do whatever it wants, really.â

Some other European countries are trying to put pressure on OrbÄąn from abroad. The Wednesday vote in the European Parliament to censure Hungary is symbolic, but itâs the first step toward suspending Hungaryâs voting privileges in the body (which serves as the EUâs legislature). This would be an unprecedented rebuke to a member-state, one explicitly framed by EU leaders s a response to Hungaryâs drift toward authoritarianism.

The OrbÄąn regime, however, is standing firm, dismissing EU sanction as part of the international pro-migrant plot. The vote was the âpetty revenge of pro-immigration politicians,â said **Peter SzijjÄąrtÄł**, Hungaryâs foreign minister.

Itâs a line that will, in all likelihood, play well at home.



Trump and OrbÃĄn. | AFP/Getty Images

An American OrbÃĄn?

But OrbÃĄnâs ambitions extend far beyond Hungary.

In a remarkable speech in late July, the prime minister defined his project as not merely remaking Hungary but developing a new governing ideology that could challenge liberal democracy across the West.

He has labeled his vision both âChristian democracyâ and, more ominously, âilliberal democracy.â Hereâs how he defined the difference between this and more conventional notions of democracy in **his July speech**:

> Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal: it is, if you like, illiberal. And we can specifically say this in connection with a few important issues â say, three great issues. Liberal democracy is in favor of multiculturalism, while Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture; this is an illiberal concept. Liberal democracy is pro-immigration, while Christian democracy is anti-immigration; this is again a genuinely illiberal concept. And liberal democracy sides with adaptable family models, while Christian democracy rests on the foundations of the Christian family model; once more, this is an illiberal concept.

The first step, he suggested, was for people across Europe to elect nationalist candidates in the May 2019 European Parliament elections. âNext May ... we can wave goodbye ... to liberal democracy,â he concluded.

There are some delusions of grandeur here: Itâs hard to imagine the leader of one small Central European country transforming the way that, say, German and French citizens think about their own political systems. Not that OrbÃĄn isnât trying to flex his international muscles: He and Italyâs Salvini are **working to create a European-wide political front** against migration.

But while OrbÃĄn may have trouble actively promoting illiberalism, Hungarian-style soft fascism â particularly its clever, quiet undermining of the electoral system â could blossom abroad even without his direct assistance.

Since Donald Trumpâs election, thereâs been a flowering of scholarship on the threat to democratic institutions in Western societies. Yascha Mounk, a senior fellow at New America, has **unearthed data** suggesting flagging support for democracy in some Western countries. Political scientists **Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt** document warning signs â like rising partisan rancor â that have plagued and doomed democracies in the past. And William Galston of the Brookings Institution argues that **rising inequality** has made a populist anti-democratic backlash more likely.

lâve always run up against a stumbling block while reading this work. Itâs easy to understand the theory â that democracyâs foundations are weakening â but harder to see in practice how a democracy like the United States or the United Kingdom would actually collapse.

The idea of a military coup just seems absurd; so too does Congress or the UK Parliament passing a law giving dictatorial power to a president or prime minister. Democracy in these countries is too well established, and too popular, to be openly demolished in the way that Adolf Hitler ended the Weimar Republic.



An anti-OrbÃĄn protest in Budapest. | Getty Images

But Hungary points to a different scenario: a series of changes to electoral rules and laws imposed over time that might individually be defensible but in combination with corruption and demagogic populism creates a new system â one that appears democratic but functionally is not.

This is something that can be done without jettisoning democratic institutions or making as much of an open mockery of them as a country like Vladimir Putinâs Russia does. All it requires is a ruling political party that cares less about democracy than about maintaining power, and a voting base willing to back the party even as it makes authoritarian rules.

Many Western countries could suffer this fate. For Americans, it is almost impossible not to pick up on echoes of OrbÃĄnâs Hungary in our recent experience.

Steve Bannon certainly sees the parallels. Trumpâs former senior strategist has repeatedly praised OrbÃĄn as a model for his vision of populist politics, once referring to him as âTrump before Trump.â This May, Bannon and OrbÃĄn spent **an hour meeting one on one** in Budapest.



Hungarian anti-OrbÃĄn demonstrators. | Laszlo Balogh/Getty Images

The similarities between the American and Hungarian leaders are hard to miss. Trump, like OrbÃĄn, is personally disdainful of constraints on his power and **the free press**. Trump, like OrbÃĄn, has built his political career around anti-immigrant populism. Trump, like OrbÃĄn, has **bent the powers of state toward personal enrichment** â and **allowed his top officials** to do the same.

When Hungarians found out I was American, many of them almost immediately pointed out the similarities between the two men. Several Hungarians told me, with an air of quiet sympathy, that they understood what we in the United States are currently going through.

âTrump and OrbÃĄn are lovely guys,â IstvÃĄn JÃĄnos TÃłth, the director of Budapestâs Corruption Research Center, said sarcastically. âThey [both] try to destroy the rule of law and institutions and the certainty of their citizens.â

But what worries me the most isnât the obvious Trump-OrbÃĄn similarities. Itâs the parallels between the Republican Party and Fidesz.



Fidesz supporters. | Laszlo Balogh/Getty Images

Trump is, on his own, neither competent enough nor institutionally powerful enough to fatally undermine American democracy. Unlike OrbÄąn in 2010, he didnât come into office with a set of concrete plans for transforming the political system. OrbÄąn had rewritten the Hungarian constitution within two years of taking office; Trumpâs only major legislative accomplishment in two years is a tax cut.

In order for a Hungarian-style system to come to America, the GOP â not just Trump, but the party as a whole â would need to play a significant role. And Republican legislators, at both the state and national level, have shown a willingness to deploy Fidesz-like tactics that undermine the fairness of the democratic system.

The most obvious one is the extreme gerrymandering of House districts: A March report from **the Brennan Center for Justice** suggests that even if Democrats win the national vote by 10 percentage points â more than the current polls suggest theyâd get â the GOP would still hold on to the House due to the way state legislatures have tortured House districts. (**Democrats gerrymander too**, of course, but not nearly to such a dramatic extent.)

Voter identification laws, which require that prospective voters present some kind of ID at the polling place, are another obvious example. Voter fraud, the problem these laws are supposed to address, is **rarer than fatal lightning strikes**. Because **Democratic voters**, particularly racial minorities, are less likely to have IDs than Republicans, an ID requirement would likely depress Democratic turnout.

Itâs not clear exactly how much of an impact those laws have on elections â the **empirical evidence is mixed** â but the point here is more the intent. The laws show that Republicans are willing to mess with the rules governing elections to give themselves an unfair, undemocratic advantage.

There are other examples of Fidesz-like electoral manipulation tactics at the state level. **Ohio Republicans developed a system**, recently upheld by the Supreme Courtâs conservative majority, for purging thousands of voters from the rolls. About a dozen Republican-governed states **have proposed plans** to copy this system. When North Carolina voters elected a Democratic governor in 2016, the Republican-controlled legislature passed a bill **stripping him of key powers**.

Also like Fidesz, the GOP has built up a state-aligned media infrastructure while simultaneously working to discredit neutral outlets. A 2017 study from Emory University political scientist Gregory Martin and Stanford economist Ali Yurukoglu found, as my colleague **Dylan Matthews explains**, that Fox Newsâs reach and partisan tilt is large enough to swing whole elections (CNN and MSNBC had no comparable impact). Sinclair Media, a pro-Trump local news conglomerate, **currently reaches 40 percent of American households** through its various stations.

And Republican voters are profoundly hostile toward the mainstream media. Ninety-two percent of Republican voters believe ânews sources report news they know to be fake, false or purposely misleading,â an **Axios/SurveyMonkey poll** from June found. An August 2018 Ipsos poll found that a **plurality of Republicans** â 43 percent â believe âthe president should have the authority to close news outlets engaged in bad behavior.â



A tram station in Budapest featuring an OrbÄąn ad. | Adam Berry/Getty Images

Finally, Republican elites have shown no willingness to stand up to Trumpâs corruption or denounce his anti-immigrant populism. The partyâs congressional delegation has covered for the former, refusing to investigate his numerous conflicts of interest, and embraced the latter, with House Speaker Paul Ryan and the bulk of the GOP congressional caucus **backing an immigration reform bill that mirrors Trumpâs hardline positions**. Vice President Mike Pence went from calling Trumpâs Muslim ban âoffensive and unconstitutionalâ before the election to **defending the travel ban once in office**.

There remain vital distinctions between Fidesz and the GOP, though. While OrbÄąn seems to actively want to destroy Hungarian democracy, there is no evidence that Republicans have any kind of similar desire â let alone a plan for turning it into action. The concern in the United States is more that Republicans are indifferent to the consequences of their actions: that they want to secure their hold on power and are willing to undermine democracy in the process of doing so.

While itâs not inevitable that Republicans will go further in this direction, itâs easy to imagine them doing so as the American electorate becomes **more diverse and more liberal**: with more extreme gerrymandering, harsher voter restrictions, and more right-wing media consolidation and **harassment of independent outlets**. No single law or anti-immigrant speech would inaugurate a soft fascist regime. But a version of Hungaryâs system could plausibly take root without many Americans realizing it.

University of Chicago law professor Aziz Huq, writing in the wake of Trumpâs firing of FBI Director James Comey, worried about a fixation on a single âcrisisâ for American democracy. The bigger worry, Huq wrote, **is slow and uneven decay**.

âDemocracy is not a simple concept ... it relies on drams of transparency, legality, impartiality, and constraint,â he wrote. âThese are promoted by a range of different laws, norms, institutions, and individual loyalties. All of these rarely vanish all at once. Their evaporation is ineffable and easily missed.â

This is the lesson the Hungarian experience offers for the United States. A political party that was once dedicated to democracy can, over time, become so preoccupied with holding power that it no longer cares enough about the substance of democracy to play by the rules.

America is not yet on that brink. The Democrats are favored to take back at least **one house of Congress** in the 2018 midterms, which would give them the power to check Trump and

the GOPâs undemocratic inclinations. Democracy in the United States has fallen ill, but itâs pretty far from a terminal diagnosis.

Yet I canât shake the memory of that meeting with Zsuzsanna SzelÄŠnyi, the just-retired legislator. This is a woman who got her start in politics challenging an openly authoritarian regime, risking arrest and imprisonment in the name of democracy. She spent years afterward working to make the transition to democracy function, to turn the vision she had risked her freedom for into a reality. And now sheâs giving up her perch in government because, in her words, âit doesnât really matter what you doâ in the legislature.

Her trajectory tells the story of how a true believer in democracy can be defeated not by force of law but through exhaustion: a collapse of any faith in working through the system after years of fruitless struggle.

Hungary is not the only country where people â even the best ones, like SzelÄŠnyi â can be ground down like this. If this new kind of fascism continues its march, it may require a new movement, a new generation of activists, to take up the fight. ■



Additional reporting by MatÄŠ Halmos.

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