

## **Defeating Orbán's Hybrid Regime**

**Article by Balázs Böcskei, Nóra Hajdu**

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The Hungarian opposition has finally managed to stand united against the governing party at the upcoming Hungarian municipal election of October 2019. Since competitive authoritarian systems are rarely stable, the aftermath of the election might even indicate whether the country can still democratise – or whether it will turn into full-blown authoritarianism.

The concept of 'hybrid regimes' has gained prominence in both international and Hungarian discourse in recent years. Put simply, it refers to regimes that demonstrate both democratic and authoritarian elements in their exercise of power. The idea was popularised in Hungarian political discourse through Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's landmark *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* which introduced the notion of the "competitive authoritarian regime".

There is no consensus in Hungary about how Viktor Orbán's regime should be described. The proponents of the hybrid regime concept analyse the Hungarian political system from a liberal-democratic perspective. Since they conceive of democracy as an exclusively "liberal" idea, the internationally acclaimed Hungarian political scientist András Köröseyi had a point when he said this concept mostly just helps explain what the Orbán regime is not. This does not make the description of the hybrid regime any less relevant. It only means, as Hungarian political scientist Zoltán Gábor Szűcs has pointed out, that the regime debate is not simply a matter of description: it is also a question of value choices.

### **Why Understanding Matters**

It is essential for political figures to be able to understand and explain the regime. Without describing or defining it, it is impossible for them to name their political adversary and thus begin countering its system of norms and political programme.

Around the world today, there is a broad spectrum of countries with regimes that lie somewhere in the grey zone between democracy and autocracy. In general, these regimes have a number of democratic features such as political parties and civil society organisations, democratic constitutions, and regular elections, but a democratic system that is on the whole deficient. Such countries commonly manifest a lack of real opportunities to engage in the political process and poor transparency, as well as the arbitrary use and concentration of power. Government and independent institutions are often intertwined in grey zone countries. Within this wider spectrum, we discuss Hungary as a hybrid regime because it still retains significant competitive elements in its democratic process.

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One of the key questions regarding hybrid regimes concerns their possible stability, and their potential to shift towards democratisation or authoritarianism. Since the 2000s, social scientists have argued that hybrid regimes do not achieve their desire for a firm grip on power in spite of their quasi-democratic institutions but rather with the help of such institutions. In most cases, these regimes are carefully constructed and managed and can demonstrate stability even in the long run.

Nevertheless, elections have always raised a dilemma for hybrid regime leaders. As [Nikolay Petrov, Maria Lipman and Henry E. Hale](#) have explained, a poor result can jeopardise their power just as a landslide victory can enhance their legitimacy. Furthermore, although certain regimes undoubtedly demonstrate strong leadership, excessive centralisation may undermine public policy-making and lead to an inadequate identification of problems. This tendency can create social discontent and, eventually, lead to growing instability.

The potential for crisis can be exacerbated by the fact that hybrid regimes, by nature, lack the consultation mechanisms and institutionalised procedures that would allow stakeholders to be involved in a transparent management of affairs. As seen in Hungary, such a state of affairs may even lead to street protests.

## **No real stability**

Levitsky and Way's research on hybrid regimes suggests that competitive authoritarian regimes do not actually demonstrate true stability. Most of the countries they analyse have either democratised or become purely authoritarian systems – only a few hybrid regimes have been able to retain their idiosyncratic model of operation.

Carrying this idea further in a [study published in the \*Journal of Democracy\*](#) in 2018, Christopher Carothers concluded that the stability of competitive authoritarian regimes tends to erode in the medium to long term because they are relatively open in the political sense. And, unlike purely authoritarian regimes, they contain an element of competition. The key to the potential survival of such regimes lies not in the dismantling of democratic institutions but in the fact that the partial dismantling of such institutions simulates a quasi-democratic system. The participation of the opposition in the elections provides legitimacy for the regime and, as in Hungary's case, the multiple electoral failures of the opposition may support the perception that there is no alternative to those in power. Since 2010, the governing party Fidesz and its ally the Christian Democratic Party have won two national elections with a two-thirds majority.

## **The four factors of regime failure**

There is no model as to how hybrid regimes are or can be overthrown. Past experience suggests that a shift in some direction can be expected, but that there is no teleological formula leading towards a liberal democratic outcome. Carothers identifies four factors which may lead to the fall of hybrid regimes:

- Legally speaking, competitive authoritarian regimes allow the opposition to run in elections, rally social support, and thus challenge the incumbent. Of course, the oft-quoted playing field may still slope towards the government but the opportunity is theoretically there. The opposition may also choose the strategy of taking baby steps and target municipal elections first. In addition to potentially bringing long-awaited victories, this approach enables the opposition to demonstrate its ability to govern. This was the route taken by the Mexican opposition in the late 1990s. The relative openness of hybrid regimes makes it possible for the political atmosphere to change so rapidly that the incumbent is unable to reframe any setbacks in time. Such an occurrence was observed in Armenia in 2018.
- Those who run the regimes discussed here may (and they indeed have done on several occasions) decide to manipulate the elections. This move can provoke a degree of frustration in society which may grow into a mass movement capable of toppling the regime. Such a violation of the general expectations can act as a catalyst for large-scale demonstrations which may channel other grievances built up over the years. "Meddling" with elections often triggers a greater indignation in the general public than if there

were no voting at all. This is what happened in Ukraine in 2004 when the Orange Revolution in Kiev broke out on live television.

- Election results may lead to a situation where the opposition, although failing to win the vote, gains relative ground in a way that angers the incumbents. In such cases, the regime leaders may decide to prevent further losses by opting for a purely authoritarian system and deciding that they no longer need democracy, not even as an empty shell. This option was selected in 1970s South Korea by the military leadership that had seized power in an earlier coup.
- Since these regimes simulate democracies, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to develop the ideological legitimisation that justifies their existence. This poses no threat to the government as long as it can rely on legitimisation through its achievement, for example due to improved economic performance or effective administration. But if governmental errors and crises occur, the opposition has a chance to attack the system on an ideological basis.

## **Unbroken legitimacy**

The observations made by Christopher Carothers may remind readers of the situation in Hungary and its potential outcomes. As far as the governing party Fidesz's own voter base is concerned, the Orbán regime's ideological legitimacy remains unbroken. The legitimacy of the sovereign "Christian Democratic" Hungary, as propagated by the party, is solid among Fidesz and Christian Democrat voters.

In the case of Hungary, the upcoming election on 13 October 2019 will indirectly strengthen the legitimacy of the system. According to a [study prepared by the Centre of Social Sciences](#) at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which was published at the beginning of summer 2019, 43 per cent of respondents think that a new era started with Orbán's 2010 election victory. This contrasts with the post-transition years after 1989, which are considered only by 22 percent of respondents to represent a single era, as there were multiple constellations of subsequent governments at that time. Thus, it is difficult to believe that respondents do not consider the new era to be an "Orbán regime" or an Orbán system.

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Certain research findings suggest that the existence of a palpable ideological antithesis – the markedly liberal thinking of the leftist-liberal camp – could give ground to an even wider recognition of the system's legitimacy. A [2018 study published by researcher Gábor Tóka](#), who has deep insights into behavioural patterns of Hungarian voters, shows that public confidence in Hungary's economic performance is just as crucial as the propaganda that demonises migrants and refugees when it comes to securing the government's electoral support. Since the EU continues to shower the government with funds, the regime has little reason to fear a decline in its economic numbers.

The role of the European Union has been highlighted in an important [study by András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs](#), which identified Hungary's post-2010 Orbán regime as unique among hybrid regimes. Its distinctive feature lies in the fact that it exists as a competitive authoritarian system operating within the European Union. As a result, the Hungarian system is simultaneously constrained and sustained (meaning financially supported and legitimised) by its EU membership.

## **Not the first chance**

The opposition has already had some opportunities to score victories in municipal by-elections and in some constituencies at the national elections. But they have not been able to deal a real blow to the regime as there is a constant competition among their fragmented parts. At the last parliamentary election, despite many expectations to the contrary, Fidesz secured its third consecutive two-thirds victory. On that night, it became clear that, had there had been a two-party system or a single opposition candidate in the single-member constituencies, Viktor Orbán's party would not now be in such a strong position.

The upcoming municipal election of October 13 fulfils the criteria for closer opposition cooperation. It is necessary and the only way to maximise their chances. In each electoral district, only one opposition candidate should run against the governing party candidate.

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If this scheme allows the opposition to have its own mayor in Budapest, as well as to win at least half of the Budapest districts – as the capital where the opposition is the strongest – and six or seven towns elsewhere, then Carothers' analysis could hold true. According to his argument, smaller opposition victories could initiate local processes of democratisation and begin to erode the regime's control over municipal government. Although based on authoritarian Chinese examples, the authors Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar have also concluded that local elections can drive “creeping democratization”.

The reason why this election has the potential to be so decisive is because hybrid regimes do not develop a long-term alternative to the purely authoritarian system, so there is a chance that the Hungarian version will begin to shift in some new direction. The existence of democratic institutions, even if functioning in arbitrary or biased ways, still are an opportunity for challengers to remove the incumbent from power.

## **Not without risks**

This scenario is realistic, but nevertheless still just a theory. Let us not forget that in case the election results point towards a change in the balance of power (even if just on the municipal level), the governing party may decide to move the country in an authoritarian direction to prevent further losses.

Even the fall of a regime bears its own risks. As illustrated by Joakim Ekman in his [comparative study of hybrid regimes](#), if the political class aiming to topple the regime does not have a strong social base, lacks legitimacy, or is divided to the point of being unable to cooperate, then the fall of a regime may lead to regression or the recreation of prior power structures.

As far as Hungary is concerned, foreign observers interested in the future of the Orbán regime should keep their eyes on the 2019 municipal elections. Just as the opposition has the chance to make gains, there is the potential for the current structure to reproduce itself and use political power to further cement the hybrid Orbán regime.

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