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How the Far-Right Extremists 'Scapegoat' their Political Opponents in Mass Media: A Hungarian Case Study

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Abstract

The media have become a powerful propaganda tool due to the technological disruption in the present day. Many governments tend to change their techniques from media censorship to creation of their own propaganda media. Taking the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, as an example, this article aims to illustrate how a right-wing populist, uses the government-controlled media, such as billboard campaigns and national consultation letters, to attack his political opponent George Soros. Different types of media platforms have been used to either spread false stories or threaten refugees and migrants. They further exaggerate that George Soros cooperates with the European Union to support refugees and migrants to enter Europe. Furthermore, Prime Minister Orbán and the Fidesz Party empowered the mass media to strategically politicize certain historical events in order to tighten their grips of political power, which succeeded in shifting Hungary into an ‘illiberal democracy state’.

This paper explores various aspects from literature on European Studies. Firstly, it adds a sheer amount of interdisciplinary research examining how right-wing populists use the media to legitimate their ruling and policy implementation. Secondly, the article supplements a vast body of analytical research identifying a set of political propaganda and discourses that have been conducted through the media. Finally, this article distinctively uses an in-depth case study analysis to relate between causes and factors.

Keywords: right-wing populism, illiberal democracy, George Soros, Viktor Orbán

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges to modern European democracy is posed by populism and the dramatic change of the political landscape towards the right-wing. The resulting vulnerability of liberal democracy allows the rise of populist leaders such as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary to openly promote the concept of “illiberal democracy”.

Liberal democracy describes both an ideology and an institutional system. Liberal democracy is a political system that not only allows for free and fair elections, but also gives importance to the rule of law, constitutional rights, a separation of powers and independence judiciary, and the protection of the basic freedom of speech, including religion and free media. On the contrary, defined by Zakaria, an illiberal democracy is a partial democracy or a hybrid regime.¹ It is a governing system where elections take place, but citizens are not given visibility to the activities of those who exercise real power, therefore not having civil liberty.² Hungary is categorized as having illiberal democracy due to the lack of an open society.

Another concept which must be introduced is populism. Mudde and Kaltwasser define populism as a concept that separate society into two homogeneous antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, also known as the “vox populi” or the “general will” of the people.³ Populism inevitably employs concepts hosted by full ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, and

fascism. According to Hiers, Soehl, and Wimmer, history is one of the most significant causal forces that shaped the process of nation-building and formation of modern state.⁴ Anderson also developed a concept of imagined community which he proposed that history is one of the political tools in creating a sense of nationality, making people who do not know each other able to imagine and feel like they belong to the same community at a certain boundary.⁵ Therefore, it is not a surprise that both history and the “feeling of belonging to a certain society” have been chosen as an instrument for populist politician to be propagated through a modern media system in many countries such as Hungary.⁶

Hungary has a long history of thousand years, and part of it was a history of domination by foreigners, such as the Ottomans, the German Hapsburgs, and the Fascists.⁷ After World War II, Hungary was influenced by communism of the Soviet Union under the Warsaw Pact. This allows modern right-wing populist, such as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, to be able to use those historical events under foreign invasion to create a collective trauma and xenophobia, or what can be described as “the fear of foreigners”⁸ among the Hungarians. The after effect on the nation was a psychological stumbling the development of civic participation.⁹ Hungary went through times of democratic development, a parliamentary system including free media, an independent judiciary after the end of the Soviet domination and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. However, not long after transitioning to democracy,

the world has later suffered greatly from the global financial crisis in 2008, for which Hungary was one of the countries in Europe that was greatly affected. The economy was operating below capacity with high unemployment rate for many years. The downturn in economy caused people to feel that the democratic system is no better than they had been through during communism period. This, in effect, has opened a window for nationalism and xenophobia to grow in Hungary, especially in countryside.

The above preconditions mentioned are what paved way for Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to undermine Hungary's democracy. When he was elected in 2010, Hungary was plunged in a deep political and economic crisis, Orbán started with reforming the constitution and weakening Hungary's independent institutions. A major turning point was in 2015 when a huge number of refugees and migrants from Syria entered the European Union member countries. This phenomenon allowed Orbán to start his political populist propaganda over the refugees and migrants issues.¹⁰ The rhetoric and antisemitism, after the Second World War, were mostly driven in this period to bring back political atmosphere and debates. The propaganda by populist leader Viktor Orbán was a political communication strategy to create a negative sentiment towards refugees and migrants among the Hungarian citizens.¹¹ This was a political technique to distract the Hungarians from domestic policies implemented by the incumbent government and turn their focus on external comers. The government

initiated campaign series on the billboards set up all across the country. The language used in Hungary public media resembled to those used in the period of antisemitic during the World War II, only difference is they were targeted towards anti-refugees, migrants, and Muslims.¹² The sentiment of anti-refugee and migrant has been widely presented on the country mainstream media as shown in figure 1.



Figure 1: An anti-refugees and migrants campaign poster by the Hungary government during the election campaign in Hungary, April 2018

(Source: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/20220/hungary-slow-descent-into-xenophobia-racism-and-human-rights-abuses>)

Apart from the anti-refugee and migrant campaigns, Hungary’s government also started to steer up Euroscepticism among its population by exaggerating the European Union’s failure to solve the refugee and migrant crisis.¹³ To intensify the notion, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Fidesz party targeted media attacks on a famous Hungarian - Jewish American investor and philanthropist, George Soros. During 2017-2018, the government had used media tools such as local newspaper, billboards, and online social media to create a “political of fear”¹⁴ of the invasion of Muslim refugees. This anti-sentiment was created upon a propaganda of George Soros and the European Union’s cooperation to allow those refugees and migrants into Europe. Nationalism was also stimulated, making the Hungarian citizens believe they were more superior. At the same time, a policy against the European Union on refugee and migrant crisis during the 2015 parliamentary elections by right-wing politicians and parties has resulted in Hungary’s domestic right-wing political success.¹⁵

The Demonization of George Soros

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was re-elected in 2018 for his third consecutive term which he openly promoted the transformation of Hungary into an illiberal state.¹⁶ He took hold of more centralized control by using his populist tactics which were obviously seen through his anti-refugee and attack on minorities. In Orbán’s campaign, he bombarded

the people with a message that refugees and migrants are threats for Hungary and the European Christian values. In order to prevent the refugees and migrant's invasion, Orbán presented himself as the “vox populi” or the voice of the people,¹⁷ who is up against the corrupted elites, which in this circumstance was referring to George Soros and the European Union. Orbán presented himself as a savior who fights severely with the externals and international organization in order to protect the real interests of the Hungarians from those invaders.¹⁸ He accused multinational firms, the European Union, and the most villains of all, George Soros, to be a source of the flood of refugees and migrants in Europe.¹⁹

Why the government of Hungary and Prime Minister Orbán have turned their focus on George Soros? Walker discusses that George Soros is an iconic capitalist; he was a former hedge fund manager and currency speculator who made billions by weakening the economy in several countries while promoting liberal political and human rights activism.²⁰ This had made Soros a contradicting figure and an attractive target for right-wing populist, especially in Hungary. Soros's reputation in Hungary started to be renowned in 2015 during the European refugee crisis,²¹ he supported asylum seekers and freedom of expression in the name of human rights. This has made him a symbolic figure whom stood up against Hungary's ultra-conservative right-wing nationalist government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. This explains why George Soros has been heavily targeted and demonized as an evil

in the Hungarian media. This kind of tactic has become one of the most important features of contemporary European politics.²² Orbán accused Soros of being a wire-puller on a flood of refugees and working on a big secret plan of supporting refugees and migrants to enter Hungary, moreover, his plans finally would destroy the nation.²³ Orbán’s government claimed that civil society organizations such as the Open Society (funded by George Soros), were the agents of foreign powers receiving money from millionaire “Uncle George” whom should be kept an eye on for its transparency. However, Soros has denied the statement and filed applications to the European Court of Human Rights and Hungary’s Constitutional Court for that accusation. In order to respond to this, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán continued to undermine judicial independence; spreading his influence over mainstream media and harming civil groups, which are among the last critical public voices left in Hungary. The Prime Minister has revived antisemitism back into life through an accusation of George Soros who is indeed a Jew. He has framed Soros into a hate figure for his own political advantage.²⁴

The Hungarian government has run a countrywide anti-Soros campaigns in 2017 in Budapest with posters symbolizing Soros as the “laughing Jew” (figure 2 and 3). The campaign delivered a perception inputting Soros as the blame for the refugee crisis in Hungary. One of the posters is translated “99 percent reject illegal migration”. This poster translation is important for the analysis of this article, where

previously mentioned, Mudde had explained the model of populism features which is the concept of “vox populi”, the way for implementing the general will of the people. This explains why the poster has to claim that almost one hundred percent of the people is opposing to refugees and migrants, this is a kind of claim in which Orbán used to legitimate his leadership and his negative policies implemented towards refugees and migrants.²⁵ Whatever policies Orbán imposed were represented as the real interests of the real people of Hungary. This is clearly a populist rhetoric. The other poster is translated “let’s not allow Soros to have the last laugh”. Although the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities had asked Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to immediately end this certain political ad campaign but the Hungary government refused to do so.



Figure 2: an anti-Soros campaign in Budapest, Hungary, 2017
(Source: <https://apnews.com/d8bdef3ef2ac46de981a27ef42328eb7>)



Figure 3: Anti-Soros billboards in Budapest
(Source: <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/07/10/hungarian-government-faces-anti-semitism-claims-amid-vilification-of-george-soros.html>)

Soros’s foundations such as Open Society foundations (OSF) and Central European University (CEU) which are supporting minority rights, and the center for civil-society initiatives in Hungary and across Eastern Europe since before the end of the Cold War: together with their supporting programs of immigrants and cultural assimilation through transnational organizations, have become the next target for Orbán’s government.²⁶ This support of immigration programs by Soros’s foundation has turned into a point which Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party constantly mention in their political propaganda. One of the most obvious cases of anti-Soros is that Orbán and his government put an effort to shut down the Central European University by accusing the university of corrupting the Hungarian society. Later, Soros decided to move the headquarter of Open Society Foundations (OSF) out of Budapest and re-settled in Berlin, Germany.²⁷



Figure 4: : Posters with slogan saying ‘Don’t let George Soros have the last laugh’

(Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/hungary-campaign-george-soros-171122120334509.html>)



Figure 5: A government billboard displaying a campaign against George Soros in October 2017

Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/hungary-elections-populist-test-europe-180402085924266.html>

In October 2017, the Hungarian government had introduced a “Soros plan”, another series of Orbán’s political propaganda. A national consultation was conducted on the issue of George Soros and his plan of helping the European Union to bring in the refugees and migrants into Hungary. A national consultation letter (figure 6) was sent to the Hungarians in order to call for help on this dangerous historic moment that was unleashed by Soros. Claimed by Orbán government, Soros’s plan, supported by Brussels, will allow a foreign international organization to settle one million migrants in Europe with the money supported from taxpayers. Orbán claims that Soros’s intention is to weaken the soul of European Christian society, to attack the West from the inside out. Supported by Orbán’s most criticized speech of that migration is the “Trojan wooden horse” of terrorism²⁸ convinced his fellows that Soros’s humanitarian activity on refugees and migrants is indoctrinating Hungarians to let them agree upon a mass migration. Europe will become unrecognizable by a flood of Muslim refugees once Soros and his allies succeeded in opening the borders; therefore, we have to protect Europe, protect Hungary.

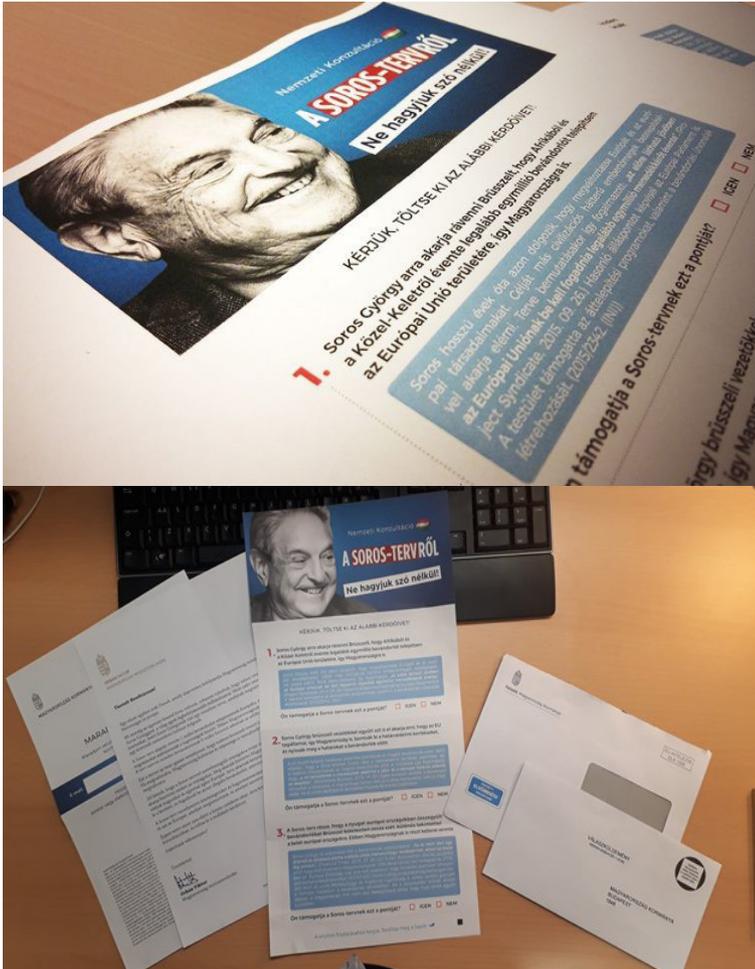


Figure 6: A national consultation letter on Soros’s plan
 (Source: <http://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/national-consultation-on-the-soros-plan/>)

Moreover, the Hungary right-wing government has amplified a campaign against Soros by passing a “stop Soros” law on June 2018. The purpose of this law was to strictly prohibit providing any kind of assistance to undocumented immigrants from individuals and organizations.²⁹ This case is an example of extreme right-wing populism government which people cannot call for check and balance system.³⁰ This bill means Hungarian government will have an extra power to jail its political opponents by accusing them for helping the migrants. “Stop Soros” law is a bill that human rights advocates fear, which will be used to shut down opposition groups and local rights.³¹ George Soros has been framed in an international plot to destroy Hungary through refugee and migrant crisis. He is considered as “big and powerful” and was accused for “destroying the lives of millions of Europeans with his financial speculations”.

The anti-Soros campaign also has an anti-Semitic undertone that plays on racist stereotypes which based on the beliefs that the Jews control the global financial system. This is an attack on basic democratic rights by an elected government. Orbán has reduced the independence of the court system and amended the constitutions to benefit the Fidesz party. The transformation process of Hungary into an illiberal democracy has given an opportunity for the Fidesz party politicians to gain more advantages over opposition candidates. An independent media was bought by his allies to mute criticism and launch a political-setting agenda. Orbán’s political strategy on the media, which has been

used to reproduce a particular message that the government intend to convey, led him and the Fidesz party to a victory at a national election. Orbán openly stated his intention of bringing an end to liberal democracy and introduce Hungary to a “Christian democracy state” as below part of speech at the parliament;

“We need to say it out loud because you can’t reform a nation in secrecy: The era of liberal democracy is over, rather than try to fix a liberal democracy that has run aground, we will build a 21st-century Christian democracy”³²

Viktor Orbán speech in parliament, May 2018

Tactics of Political Control: Undermining Civil Society and Control of Media

Hungary has been experiencing a significant transformation of constitutional and institutional changes by Viktor Orbán and his ruling party Fidesz who concreted their political power by controlling judicial system and other key institutions such as media.³³ At the beginning, in the same way as many other countries in the world, Hungary’s constitution intends to protect the freedom of speech and of the press. However, later in 2010 when Fidesz party won an election and received a supermajority in the Hungarian parliament, this allowed Prime Minister Viktor Orbán a chance to pass and change legislative on media.³⁴

As a result, Orbán's government was able to tighten its grip control on the broadcast sector and extend regulation on print and online media. Moreover, Orbán's government has amended the constitution to remove the government's obligation to prevent media monopolies. This action in turn shows the difficulty of keeping the freedom of speech in the country.

Therefore, Hungary's private media has been almost entirely under the government's influences. Fidesz has played an important role to take control over media since they have received donation from their owners who are close to the Fidesz party and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Since taking power in 2010, Viktor Orbán and his allies slowly has attacked on pluralism by monitoring and reshaping the legislation, to take control of media, to favor his party in order to increase his autocratic rule.³⁵

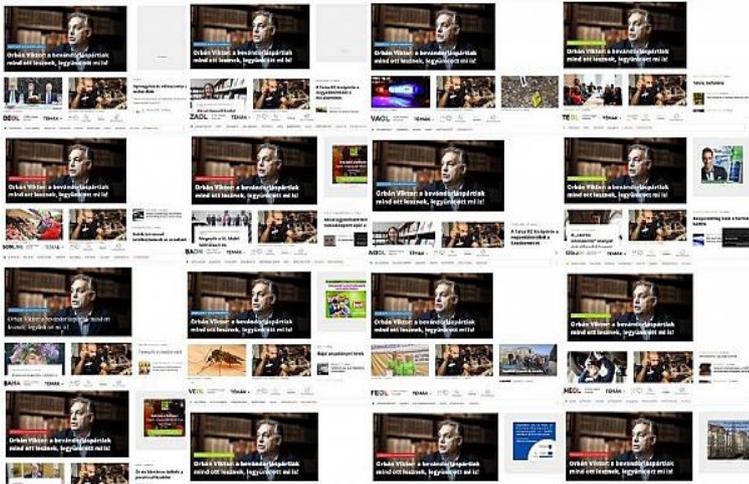


Figure 7: Almost identical front pages of 16 regional newspapers under the ownership of the KESMA in Hungary (Source: <https://www.euronews.com/2019/11/21/a-free-press-no-more-the-media-in-hungary-has-become-nothing-more-orban-s-mouthpiece-view>)

The Central European Press and Media Foundation (Közép-Európai Sajtó és Média Alapítvány – KESMA) is known as a pro-government right-wing media conglomerate established by the governing Fidesz party,³⁶ which now has more than 500 media outlets under its umbrellas including county newspapers, news channels and radio stations, numerous magazines, internet portals, tabloid and sports newspapers (as of 14 February 2020). Orbán’s ability to control national media is the key to sustaining his political power;³⁷ media has become a mechanism and a very effective weapon to spread the messages in which

the Orbán's government wants to convey to the people. In summary, these are political tactics of right-wing populist using a modern method of social media and other kinds of media to broadcast its propaganda.

Conclusion

The propaganda of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government using the media to manipulate the citizens, by blaming George Soros over refugees and migrants crisis, is proven to be processed. This could be simply due to repeated exposure to various media sources over the topic, causing the accusation to unconsciously becomes public knowledge and belief in the perception. Moreover, with the tight control by the government, it is easier to target any particular person, which in this case, is George Soros. Even though the campaign against George Soros by the Fidesz party and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was not directly an antisemitic in itself, but it had the potential to empower people who were. Soros is a useful target since he is the insider (Hungarian-born) and also the outsider (immigrated to England and United States of America). He was both a Hungarian Jew and a foreign capitalist who had financially attacked many countries. The reason that the author has selected Hungary as a case study is because Hungary could represent the most illustrative case in Europe for analyzing the discourse of right-wing populism according to its obvious anti-refugee and migrant campaign. Also, the strong reaction

from the country leader, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has been straightforwardly recognized. Thus, this has made Hungary one of the best cases study from the Visegrád group.

In fact, the European Member States are obliged to keep a free environment and warrant media plurality, so that European citizens can freely express their ideas and opinions when participating in public events. However, in Hungary’s case, the European Union shows the lack of action to intervene and enforce the Hungarian government to protect the media freedom and pluralism. On the other hand, a tight government control over media opens a window for right-wing populist like Orbán to strengthen his political power to further destabilize Hungary democracy. Independent press started to dissolve while the time of right-wing politics and propaganda has come. Orbán and his Fidesz party persuade the Hungarians to believe that they are on a mission to “save Hungary” from a flood of Muslim refugees which is secretly supported by a giant capitalist George Soros. The same technique of authoritarian rulers in China who persuade the mass as a mean to its ruling legitimacy.³⁸ In accordance, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán convinces the Hungarians to believe that they have to stand up against the refugees. The Hungarians would, then, support the government negative policies implement to refugees and migrants. This creation of imaginary enemies by right-wing populists has been obviously recognized in modern Hungarian domestic politics. Nowadays, this kind of anti-sentiment and political discourse such as in the case of

Hungary, can be found more often at the European Union level, especially in the Visegrád group. This might sound unfamiliar and perhaps seems to be outdated, however, it can be assured that the wave of right-wing populism can spring in this European disruptive politics quite successfully.

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