

Hungary's Illiberal Democracy

[00:00:00] Anne Applebaum: "You can give it different names. I don't really like the word 'populism' but you can certainly use the word 'far right,' you can use the word 'authoritarian right,' you can use the word 'anti-pluralist.'"

[00:00:13] This is Anne Applebaum, a staff writer for The Atlantic and a Pulitzer-prize winning historian, on the [Lawfare Podcast](#) back in April.

[00:00:19] The episode was recorded shortly after a new emergency law went into effect in Hungary. The law granted Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister and leader of the Fidesz Party, the power to rule by decree in order to better handle the coronavirus pandemic.

[00:00:36] Applebaum: "He's now a political leader who doesn't really acknowledge anymore the legitimacy of opponents and who seeks to maintain power by, through a combination gerrymandering, control of the press, control of business, control of the economy [...] And Fidesz is now a party that has a completely different status from any other party in Hungary. It has more money, more connections. It's able to function in a way that nobody else can. So you don't really have real democracy anymore in Hungary, in the sense that you have some sort of even playing field."

[00:01:09] When the emergency law passed at the end of March, Applebaum tweeted that the European Union now had its first dictatorship. Her assessment was alarming, and by no means unique. It is the prevailing view among many western liberals.

[00:01:21] I wanted to speak with someone on the ground in Hungary to get a better sense of what is happening. I first reached out to a Hungarian journalist based in Budapest who had been reporting on the emergency law. We exchanged emails as he contemplated an on-the-record interview, but he ultimately decided against it, citing the delicate state of press freedom in the country. I certainly can't blame him, but this didn't exactly inspire confidence in the present trajectory of Hungary. He did, however, connect me with another reporter.

[00:01:51] Andras Petho: "My name is Andras Petho. I am journalist with *Direkt36*, an investigative reporting center based in Budapest. I'm one of the original co-founders."

[00:02:10] Petho's backstory and career is a living illustration of the changes effecting Hungary. He started his career in 2002 at an organization called *Origo*, a popular news website in Hungary. Apart from a few stints abroad, he worked there for the next dozen years, reporting in a media environment comparable to other modern democracies. But by late 2013, after he returned to Hungary following a fellowship at the *Washington Post*, he noticed things had changed.

[00:02:37] Petho: "Basically I returned to find *Origo* under political pressure. They didn't have the same kind of freedom anymore that we used to have. And then a few months later, it was early summer in 2014, when, as a result of this pressure, of this growing

pressure, the editor in chief of *Origo* was dismissed and, because I knew that it happened because of political reasons, I resigned, and the other people resigned. Then some of my former colleagues, including the former editor in chief of *Origo*, we set up *Direkt36*, this investigative reporting non-profit.”

[00:03:32] *Direkt36* is one of the few remaining bright spots in Hungary’s media landscape. They are entirely independent, funding their work through a combination of reader donations, grants from foundations, and licensing agreements with other media outlets. This allows them to go after stories that other news organization avoid, either because they are too lengthy and complicated, or because they are too risky to pursue. Look at what happened to *Origo*, and consider what it is has become.

[00:03:57] Sandsmark: “So, with respect to *Origo*, is that in existence still? What is its current form?”

[00:04:05] Petho: “Yes it’s still exists. It’s very different from the *Origo* that I worked for. It’s basically a part of the government propaganda machinery. And actually I think it is their digital flagship propaganda site. It gave up any pretense of objectivity or impartiality. It openly supports the government.”

[00:04:32] The fate of *Origo* is indicative of wider trends. By [some estimates](#), 90 percent of the media in Hungary is under the control of Orbán loyalists.

[00:04:46] Sandsmark: “How exactly would you describe or characterize the media landscape in Hungary, and in particular its independent media?”

[00:04:57] Petho: “You can still find still independent outlets. There are still outlets who are very much critical with the government. But what I always say is that the space for this kind of journalism is shrinking and is shrinking rapidly.”

[00:05:18] Take *Index*, the largest news website in Hungary and the country’s last major independent media outlet. It recently came under the control a pro-Orbán businessman, and after the editor in chief publicly complained of external pressure, he was fired. More than 70 journalists and staffers resigned in protest. All this happened days before I spoke with Petho.

[00:05:42] Petho: “It seems to be collapsing now under some kind of political pressure, apparent political pressure. Almost the whole staff has resigned, so that’s a huge blow for this independent media space.”

[00:06:10] They resigned with no clear place to go. This is what Petho means by the shrinking of media landscape in Hungary. There are exceptions like *Direkt36*, which demonstrates that independent reporting is still possible.

[00:06:21] Petho: “Hungary is still not Russia or Turkey. Journalists don’t go to jail for their work.”

[00:06:31] Nevertheless, the situation is far from ideal. *Direkt36* is a very small operation, made up of only seven staffers. It cannot possibly absorb the number of journalists who left their jobs in Hungary because of political pressure, and they cannot replace the breadth of reporting offered by websites like *Index* either. And apart from taking over independent media outlets like *Origo* and *Index*, Orbán controls Hungary's state media.

[00:06:59] Petho: "The government symmetrically has built – it's not only a propaganda machine, but it's basically a whole ecosystem of pro-government media. They control the public media in Hungary. [...] This is a really powerful force. It's not journalism what they do. It's propaganda. It can be quite scary sometimes to see how powerful it is."

[00:07:32] The power of state media in Hungary, and the relative weakness of independent media, has created an unhealthy information environment. In Hungary as elsewhere, the public are passive news consumers. They don't necessarily distinguish between independent investigations and government propaganda, and this allow Orbán and his government to elude press scrutiny.

[00:07:53] Against this backdrop came the coronavirus crisis and the emergency law passed in response to it.

[00:08:00] [Newscast](#): "Human rights watchdogs are expressing alarm over new legislation in Hungary that hands sweeping powers to the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. He says it's needed to mount an effective response to the coronavirus outbreak, but opposition figures say it is open to abuse."

[00:08:17] As the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic shifted from China to Europe, many countries in the EU enacted emergency measures, but the emergency law in Hungary was especially sweeping. Apart from the power to rule by decree, Orbán was [granted the authority](#) to suspend certain laws, and anyone who publicized information that was deemed to be false or harmful to public health could face several years in jail. When first enacted, the emergency law was not time-limited either.

[00:08:50] The worst fears of Orbán's critics—that he would become a dictator able to rule by decree indefinitely—did not come to pass. On July 16, nearly 100 days after going into effect, the Hungarian Parliament voted to rescind the emergency law, although there is [some controversy](#) over whether Orbán retains effectively the same powers thanks to subsequent legislation.

[00:09:10] For his part, though, Petho said it was hard to see how the emergency law, including its after effects, made much of a difference, in light of Orbán's grip on the country.

[00:09:21] Petho: “He already had a supermajority in the Parliament. He already had basically unlimited power in Hungary. So, I didn’t see how that the emergency powers will make such a big difference.”

[00:09:39] It is worth pausing to reflect on how Hungary arrived at its current position, where even an emergency law granting the power the rule by decree is just a continuation of the status quo.

[00:09:52] Until recently, Hungary’s history over the last few decades was generally told as a success story. Like several other central European countries, Hungary left behind its communist past with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. For the first time since World War II, they began holding democratic elections. They joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. It was not a perfect story of linear progression by any means, but Hungary had nevertheless emerged from behind the Iron Curtain into what looked like a brighter future.

[00:10:23] Orbán himself [played an integral role](#) in this trajectory, first, ironically, as a reformer pushing for an end to one-party communist rule. It was in the years leading up to 1989 that the Fidesz Party first formed, and it was originally a liberal party. But over the next decade, the party shifted rightward, with Orbán building a new conservative coalition to compete in the 1998 election. The transformation worked, and that year he was elected as Prime Minister at the age of 35. Some of his actions as Prime Minister foreshadowed his later moves, but his time in office was not especially controversial.

[00:11:00] The Fidesz Party lost power in 2002, and for the next eight years, the country was run by the socialist party, which massively expanded Hungary’s debt. In the face of the financial crises in 2008, the country nearly defaulted. The International Monetary Fund provided a loan, but it imposed unpopular austerity policies on the country. Capitalizing on the discontent of the populace, Orbán returned to power in 2010 in a landslide win.

[Orbán being [declared victorious](#) in 2010 – Hungarian language]

[00:11:36] Enjoying two-thirds support in Parliament, a supermajority, Orbán quickly got to work shaping the country and its constitution according to his right-wing populist vision.

[00:11:44] Petho: “Under the Hungarian system, if you have a supermajority in Parliament, then you can do anything. You can rewrite the constitution, which they did several times.”

[00:12:07] To some extent, Hungary’s recent transformation is an expression of the democratic will of the people, but a few factors complicate the picture. First, Orbán’s control of the media raises obvious concerns, since it is difficult to hear the voice of opposition leaders in a country that systematically favors the ruling party.

[00:12:23] Second, under Orbán, parliamentary districts were redrawn. The districts are superficially plausible, unlike the geometrically absurd dimensions of many districts in the US, but the upshot of the redrawing is clear: liberal-leaning districts in cities contain more people than conservative rural districts, which gives conservatives more voting power. The effect is obvious: in both 2014 and 2018, the Fidesz party received less than 50 percent of the vote, but retained a two-thirds majority in Parliament after both elections.

[00:12:56] Finally, Orbán and his party have reshaped the judiciary. They expanded the number of seats on the constitutional court, and also forced justices over 62 to retire. By 2015, 11 of the 15 justices on the court, which decides if laws are constitutional, were nominated by Orbán and confirmed by his Parliament.

[00:13:17] It is not so difficult to retain power when one enjoys broad control over the press, election procedures, and the judiciary.

[00:13:24] Petho: “There is a lot of debate about whether Hungary is still a democracy or not and I’m not going to go into that question. But I think when you have fear on such a deep level that is necessarily a problem—that people are afraid to express their opinion. You know, that’s a problem. And I think in that way there has certainly been some kind of impact from this regime.”

[00:14:01] Not everyone sees the situation in Hungary as a problem, of course. Apart from his many supporters in Hungary, Orbán also has admirers from abroad, including the United States.

[00:14:13] [Newscast](#): “At least one politician in Europe is fearlessly raising an alarm about the kind of society European elites want to create, one that is rejected unanimously almost by European citizens. In a speech yesterday kicking off his party’s bid for reelection, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán warned that politicians in Brussels, Berlin, and Paris are going to destroy Western civilization with their enthusiasm for mass migration. Left unchecked, he said, Europe could end up with a Muslim-majority, while the continent’s Christian culture would be blotted out.”

[00:14:44] That is Tucker Carlson on his nightly news program in 2018. One might expect this sort of thing on Fox News, which has a special talent for framing every issue in a way that maximally enflames the culture wars. But admiration for Orbán can also be found in more rarified circles. Indeed, many [prominent American conservative intellectuals](#) have voiced their support for Orbán and his policies, including Rod Dreher, a senior editor for *The American Conservative* who written admiringly of Orbán. Dreher thinks that Western liberals fundamentally misunderstand the situation in Hungary.

[00:15:15] Rod Dreher: “Orbán became a real villain to the Western media back in 2015, when the immigration wave came out of Syria. That was when a lot of Americans became aware of Orbán because he closed Hungary’s borders to these immigrants. [...] To me, that demonstrated that this is a man who understands how immigration

works and how if we have a liberal immigration policy, it is going to be impossible, especially for a small country like Hungary, to maintain its own sense of national identity and national culture.”

[00:15:59] Dreher says that this sort of attitude is impossible for many Americans to understand. The US is too large and heterogenous for these concerns to make much sense. The US is also generally not on the receiving end of cultural imposition. We do the imposing, not the other way around.

[00:16:16] “I think that small nations like Hungary ought to have the right to have a say over the kind of country there going to be and the kind of country there going to leave to the children and grandchildren...This idea of there being one big global liberal secular blob that eliminates distances or seeks to eliminate distances to turn everyone into nice, liberal consumers, I think that’s a really bad thing. And I admire Viktor Orbán for standing up to that.”

[00:16:52] Dreher drew a parallel with the Vox Party in Spain, a conservative, anti-immigration party that he is in broad sympathy with.

[00:16:58] Dreher: “Their great sin in Spain is to say that we have to stop immigration because we are going to lose what makes Spain, Spain. Well this is what Orbán has been saying for years and why he is so respected among conservative Americans, and conservative American Christians in particular.”

[00:17:21] They admire Orbán because he stands up for the cultural and religious particularity of Hungary. In so doing, he defends Christianity itself. This is attractive to conservative American Christians because they feel besieged, rightly or wrongly.

[00:17:34] Dreher: “Here we are in the United State watching Christianity dissolve. The statistics are very clear about the great fall off of Christianity among millennials and the generation Z behind them. It’s not only an abandonment, a wholesale abandonment, in terms of numbers, but also in terms of their understanding of what Christianity is. [...] Well, for people who take Christianity seriously, the claims it’s makes theologically and the fact that those claims have to be in some way embodied in a collective memory, have to be embodied in places, in buildings, in rituals. All the things that make a culture a culture. Everything in the United States is working to dissolve Christianity.”

[00:18:32] Dreher is correct about the overall trend line, although Christianity seems to be changing more than it is vanishing. Regardless, his main point is that Hungary is in a different position. It isn’t yet a liberal, pluralistic state with no unified national identity, and so Hungary should hold on to what it has, even if—maybe especially if—this offends liberal western sensibilities.

[00:18:58] “To the extent that liberal internationalist structures and goals and ideologies work to dissolve the particularities of the Hungarian nation, the Hungarian people, and their historic religion, then it has to be resisted.”

[00:19:20] Orbán's most explicit attempt to preserve Christianity in Hungary is literally written into the country's constitution. In 2011, almost exactly one year after being elected, Orbán's Fidesz Party passed an entirely new constitution into law, which has been an object of controversy ever since. The first proclamation of the constitution reads as follows: "We are proud that our king Saint Stephen built the Hungarian State on solid ground and made our country a part of Christian Europe one thousand years ago." And while the constitution affirms the value of different religious traditions present in the country, it also explicitly evokes "the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood." When Hungarian identity and Christian identity blend together, we might reasonably wonder if other religious traditions are actually being valued.

[00:20:08] Rewriting the constitution is at the heart of Orbán's quest to create a "Christian democracy," which he forthrightly calls illiberal.

[\[Orbán's speech\]](#) – Hungarian language]

[00:20:23] The recording is from a now-famous speech Orbán gave at a summer camp in eastern Hungary in 2018. It is extended meditation on the Christian foundations of Hungary and Europe more broadly. Near the end he draws his distinction between liberal democracy and Christian democracy. Liberal democracy values multiculturalism, Christian democracy does not; liberalism democracy is for immigration, Christian democracy is against it; and so on. By its very nature, then, Christian democracy is illiberal.

[00:20:59] Above all else, it is the idea of creating a privileged space for Christianity in Hungary that excites religious conservatives like Dreher.

[00:21:07] Dreher: "One thing I like about Orbán is his understanding that the Christian religion is deeply tied into Hungarian national identity and this is not a bug, it's a feature. Now I would be opposed if he were trying to impose any particular form of Christianity or Christianity itself onto Hungarians. Nevertheless, I appreciate greatly how he sees a real and vital role in Hungarian national life and in the cultural memory for the Christian faith. It's not an accident of history that Hungarians have been Christian and he sees it as important that they remain Christian, or at least that Christians remain dominate there. And I think he's right."

[00:22:03] He made a parallel case for majority-Muslim countries.

[00:22:07] Dreher: "I would certainly see how Muslim leaders in, say, Turkey—I could not fault them for wanting Turkey to remain majority Muslim and have its Islamic history reflected in the state's policies. There's got to be a limit on that. I think that we have to support religious liberty insofar as avoiding compulsion in religion. I would expect that in a Muslim country and I would expect it in a Christian country like Hungary."

[00:22:42] Sandsmark: “So how exactly do you thread that needle? On the one hand, you have a commitment to religious liberty. You certainly don’t want, you know, do anything resembling forced conversions or something like that. But on the other hand [you are] wanting to preserve the sort of cultural and religious coherence of a society. How does one go about doing that without violating one side or the other?”

[00:23:05] Dreher: “Sure. That’s one of the central questions about Orbán and this is why he is illiberal, an illiberal democrat. I think that we can’t have everything, that at some point if you are going to preserve the Christian faith in a nation and preserve that nation’s long sense of cultural identity and its traditions, you are going to have to exclude certain people and privilege others. This is why Orbán shut the borders to immigration, because he realized that in a country as small as Hungary, if a number of Middle Eastern Muslims took refuge there, that soon enough, because of democracy, the Hungarians could lose what makes them Hungarian.”

[00:23:58] Because of democracy. And here we confront the central issue with Hungary. Despite signs of democratic backsliding, Hungary is many ways still a democracy, and this is important for Orbán’s legitimacy. When he denounces liberal democracy, notice that he only rejects the first half, the “liberal” part. He still wants to govern with a democratic mandate, but he can only maintain his position if preserves the status quo, or shapes the status quo to conform to his vision of Hungary. For Dreher, this can only be done when nations privilege certain religious groups, especially with respect to their immigration policies.

[00:24:37] Dreher: “Just in principle, I don’t see any reason why a particular historic religion should not be privileged. And it indeed it has to be privileged in these countries, if it is going to withstand the forces of liberal, capitalist modernity.”

[00:25:00] But even if we concede this point, and in so doing set aside whatever humanitarian misgivings we might have with Hungary’s immigration policies, we can still question *how* Orbán has gone about achieving his ends. And we can further question if the populace truly embraces, or even fully understands, his project of preserving and defining Hungarian identity.

[00:25:19] This brings us back to the way that Orbán has governed Hungary, and in particular the way he controls the information ecosystem in the country. I asked Dreher if he has reservations about Orbán, telling him about my reporting experience.

[00:25:30] Sandsmark: “So I’ve been trying to contact journalists to speak with for this documentary. I’ve been in contact with a guy and he had to talk to his editors to see if it was possible and he ultimately decided that it was just too risky; he didn’t want to do it. I don’t know if you would regard that as sort of liberal handwringing or something like that. But at least in his mind, he was concerned about the situation and the precariousness of press freedoms. So are there dimensions of Orbán’s rule that give you pause or that concern you?”

[00:26:00] Dreher: “Yeah, that is precisely one of them—what’s happening to press freedom there. Again I emphasize that I am an outsider to Hungary. I don’t know a lot of the inner details of what’s going on there. I’m just speaking as an outsider who is sympathetic to much of what Orbán has said and much what he has done. Yet when I hear about the clamp down of press freedom there, that really really concerns me. I perfectly well understand that the media may be strongly against Orbán and unfair to him. I see how it happens in our country too. [...] Nevertheless, we have to have freedom of the press. We have to have freedom of speech. If we don’t have that, we are on the road to tyranny.”

[00:26:50] In theory, an institution like the EU could help address an issue like this, exerting pressure on Hungary to protect certain rights and freedoms. But the EU has limited powers on this front. And enabling the EU to more forcefully intervene in member states internal affairs is not a palatable suggestion for thinkers like Dreher, even if it were possible.

[00:27:11] Dreher: “Of course I want to see a Europe at peace, and peacefully trading with each other. But the unity and peace Europe has bought for itself, insofar as it has done so at the expense of national traditions and national particularities, I think it’s too costly. I want Spain to be Spain; I want France to be France; I want Hungary to be Hungary.”

[00:27:37] Granting countries their sovereignty—letting Spain be Spain, France be France, and Hungary be Hungary—we confront an unsettling question: did democracy in Hungary arrive at the wrong conclusion?

[00:27:50] At least at first, Orbán’s assumption of power was a perfectly legitimate democratic event. The Hungarian people were deeply displeased with the existing government in 2010, so they voted them out, and voted Orbán and his Fidesz Party in—overwhelmingly. It was precisely this overwhelming win that gave him the support he needed to make fundamental changes to Hungary, such as rewriting the constitution. The reconfiguration of Hungary’s laws took place under a democratic mandate, and if the Hungarian people want to declare their country a Christian nation, is there anything wrong with this? If the people *choose* illiberalism, is the liberal west in a position to chide them for it?

[00:28:33] These are difficult questions, but it worth remembering that democracies do not exist in a vacuum. They only thrive when they are bolstered by a larger set of values and commitments—to fairness, to truth, to free inquiry, and so on. In other words, we need to attend to the context in which votes occur, and make sure that context is healthy. If a society limits speech, or restricts the press—by explicit policy or by veiled threat—then voters are making decisions in a compromised environment. Setting aside complex questions about gerrymandering and constitutional law, there are reasons to worry about a society in which 90 percent of the media is controlled by Orbán and his allies.

[00:29:17] As Petho put it at the end of conversation, after mentioning the collapse of the news outlet Index once again.

[00:29:25] Petho: “The room for rational discourse and debates is getting smaller and smaller.”

[00:29:38] And even when a democracy is healthy, populated with informed and free citizens, we might embrace at least one additional value, namely, epistemic humility. Truth is hard to come by in this world. Every life is unique, shaped by specific influences and pressures, and so we cannot reasonably expect convergence around one truth—on what to believe and how to act; on the true religion and the nature of a meaningful life. We therefore have reasons to be wary of the state taking a side on these issues, or of tilting public discourse to suppress one viewpoint in the service of another. This concern is not lost on many of Orbán’s supporters, and hence the emphasis on the need for freedom of speech and religion, despite their support for the Orbán regime.

[00:30:24] But if we are committed to these basic liberties, then what we want is a liberal democracy, not an illiberal one.