

Interview with Prof. Béla Bodó, Professor for Middle and Eastern European History at the University of Bonn

Bonner Akademie: How would you evaluate the Hungarian government's treatment of the corona pandemic and its crisis management in general?

Prof. Dr. Béla Bodó: The Hungarian government reacted relatively early and strongly to the crisis. It began to restrict domestic and international travel and educate the public about the nature of the health emergency in early March. By mid-March the country was subjected to an almost complete lockdown: the borders had been sealed to tourists; schools, kindergartens, restaurants and cultural centers had been closed; orders for people to stay at home and curfews were imposed; and many companies either completely stopped, or significantly scaled down, their operations. The lockdown in Hungary has been less restrictive than those in Italy and Spain, but it is more rigid than in Nordrhein-Westfalen. The closest comparison can be made with Austria and Southern German states, such as Bavaria. Since it had almost complete control over the media, the government was able to put its message through and mobilize the public behind its plans easily. The government's public relations campaign has paid special attention to the elderly both at home and in the retirement communities. It implored the elderly to stay at home and pleaded with their family members to limit visitation; in small communities, local governments have provided extra services, such as food delivery, to limit movement; simultaneously, the local authorities sealed off old-age homes to prevent the spread of infection to the most vulnerable segment of the population. China, with which the Hungarian government has been cultivating close political ties (to the annoyance of Western European states and Nato partners), has provided the country with badly needed medical supplies, including face masks. In some places, the masks were distributed free of charge; more often, people had to buy it for about 500 forints (one and a half Euro) in pharmacies. As a result of Chinese generosity and political calculation, the Hungarian public had easier access to face masks than people in Germany or the United States. To date, the wearing of mask has not been made compulsory by an order of the national government. However, many municipalities, big and small, have taken the initiative to do exactly that; here, too, the situation resembles the larger European, and indeed global, pattern.

How effective have these measures been to combat the pandemic? The government attributes the low infection and mortality rates mainly or entirely to the early and relatively strict lockdown that it has put in place. The numbers are indeed impressively low, even if they do not completely reflect reality; similarly, mortality rates could not be attributed to the quarantine only. The official numbers may have been deliberately skewed to paint an unduly rosy picture. Since relatively few people have been tested for the virus in Hungary (much fewer, both in absolute and relative terms, than in neighboring Austria), we do not really know how many people have contracted the disease. Fewer tourists, less mobility, the isolation of rural communities, lower population density and smaller, one or two-generation households (with the exception of the Roma population), delayed the spread of the epidemic. Mortality rate among people over the age of 55 has been traditionally high in Hungary, thus the age cohort, which has been most affected by the crisis, is smaller in Hungary than in the majority of Western European states. The majority of old-age homes in Hungary are underfunded and in a sorry state; as a result, they have been less popular among the elderly than they are in Western Europe. Unlike Romanian migrant workers, who have worked in the worst affected countries such as Italy, Spain and France, the majority of Hungarian migrants have found work in Great Britain, Austria and Germany, where the infection and mortality

rates have been lower. In contrast to the Romanians and the Bulgarians, the majority of Hungarian migrants did not return to the country after the onset on the crisis. All of these factors help to explain why fewer people have contracted the disease in Hungary than in most Western European states and among some of its Eastern European neighbors.

The government's management of, and immediate response to, the crisis could be described as appropriate and good. This cannot be said about the government's health policy in the last ten years, however. The Hungarian hospitals, particularly in the provinces, are in bad shape. Many buildings are old and needed to be renovated. There are not enough beds, modern equipment and personnel. Administrators often complain about the lack of disinfectants and toilet paper. The number of people who contract infectious diseases in medical facilities and died as the result is unusually high. Because of the low salaries, thousands of Hungarian caretakers, nurses and doctors have left the country. The present government, like all its predecessors since 1990, has done precious little to end endemic corruption, by significantly raising the salaries of doctors and nurses and seriously punishing medical personnel who accept, or even demand, "tips" and bribes. If anything, the approach of the government to the crisis has only increased corruption: for example, no one knows on what basis the medical supplies received from China has been distributed among hospitals, pharmacies and the population and if, and how much, of the supplies has ended up in private hands. Military and political control over hospitals, which has led to the firing of directors who dared to disagree with the government's orders, only increases confusion, feeds fear and promotes conformity, and thus lowers the quality of services. The Enabling Law undermines hard fought workers' rights and makes the firing of employees easier. This, in turn, raises the specter of mass unemployment, and rapid decline in the standard of living of large segments of the population.

Bonner Akademie: Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been granted extensive power through an Enabling Law during the Corona pandemic. Was this empowerment necessary to combat the crisis or is it nothing but another means to accumulate power?

Bodó: The direct and indirect control of the government over much of the media allowed the power brokers in Hungary to put forward their own version of national and international events and exploit the health crisis to their advantage. The corona crisis gradually replaced the migrant crisis as the main topic of discussion in the media and as a source of legitimization for the government. Especially in the early stage the crisis, the two issues were intertwined: media outlets friendly to the government sought to convince the public that refugees and migrants were partially responsible for the crisis and could spread the virus. Mainly as a result of foreign pressure, this message has been put on the back burner in the last two weeks. Still, the government has used the health crisis to suspend the processing of refugee claims during the duration of the epidemic.

Emergency Decree 40/2020 and the subsequent emergency statutes (such as the Enabling Act) are highly political, both in regard to their origins and goals. Many legal experts believe these measures were not needed, and that they are unconstitutional. An earlier statute, Act 128 of 2011, has already regulated the management of natural disasters. Similarly, Act CLIV of 1997 on Health and Act CXXVIII of 2011 on Emergency Management gave the government significant power to deal with medical emergencies. The government did not need emergency powers impose the current curfews, for example: the earlier laws sufficed. Oppositional groups and many foreign observers believe that the laws are part of a grand design, and that they mark the transition from a "hybrid" regime to a purely authoritarian one. Others think that the emergency laws represent a temporary overreach only: a new step in the already wrong direction, but one that could be still reversed. The government argues that these measures are

constitutional, and they were needed to cope effectively with the crisis: that check and balances have not disappeared, because the parliament and the courts have the power to reverse them at any time. The problem is that the ruling Fidesz party has a two-thirds majority in the parliament: thus, it is strong enough to block any such proposal. The lower courts, which could challenge the decrees issued on the basis of the Emergency Law, are effectively closed during the emergency. Moreover, it could take, in normal times, months, if not years, for most cases to reach the verdict phase and the appeals to end up before the Constitutional Court. Unlike the trial-courts, the Constitutional Court remains open during the emergency. However, people who could bring abstract cases before the Constitutional Court, such as the president, the public prosecutor or the ombudsman, have been deferential to the government and the Prime Minister. In brief, the critics of the government believe that neither the parliament nor the Constitutional Court could act as free agent. The checks and balances may still exist on paper, but the new laws will remain in effect until the Prime Minister, the government and the ruling Fidesz party decide to change it.

Bonner Akademie: The EU has been very vocal in its criticism of the new Hungarian laws and has even threatened to sue the country for violating EU regulations. Are the threats viable means to placate Viktor Orbán or are they more suited to enhance his stance against EU influence?

Bodó: It is a Catch 22: the EU could use mainly the power of the purse to enforce compliance with its laws and regulations and punish violators. The EU funds and subsidies are meant to build a political home based on shared values; yet today they are used to bolster a government and a political system that the majority of political parties and states in Europe view as either undemocratic or one which has serious democracy deficits. The issue is complex; still I do not believe that cutting off funds and subsidies to a relatively poor county such as Hungary during an emergency would be politically wise or morally justifiable. If I am not mistaken, the European Parliament does not have the right to propose such legislation – and the Commission, in which Hungary has veto power, clearly will not do it. The discussion about reducing or completely cutting off subsidies to Hungary puts the EU and Western politicians in a bad light. Such a measure, if enacted, would be interpreted as a sign of the arrogance of the wealthy, at best, and blackmail, at worst. It would also put the oppositional parties in Hungary in an awkward position. It would certainly not change the minds of Hungarian officials, who feel besieged already, and who sincerely believe that they have been unjustifiably attacked and vilified by social and green politicians in the EU parliament, civic organizations controlled by foreign governments and “globalist” masterminds, such as George Soros, and by the “mainstream” media. Such measures would allow the government to claim victimhood, and at the same time confuse and alienate people who are dependent on these subsidies but do not necessarily sympathize with the current government.

Bonner Akademie: Are the measures taken in the Hungarian Enabling Law really that different from the ones taken in other countries in their fight against the pandemic? Is Hungary being judged differently because Viktor Orbán is viewed more critically than other countries’ heads of government?

Bodó: The emergency represents a threat to liberalism and democracy everywhere. Basic civil rights, such as the freedom of movement, assembly and in many cases, speech, have been seriously curtailed. Political life has been reduced to the management of the crisis. In most countries, the media have been practicing self-censorship. The crisis has witnessed the rise of the surveillance state everywhere: Hungary is not the only one where the government has claimed the right to collect information from private sources, such as one’s cell phone. The authorities everywhere tolerate, and even encourage,

denunciations. In many states, the army has been called upon to restrict movement and confine people to their homes. In many countries the police and the army have use violence to break up gatherings and punish the violators. The threat to the liberal and democratic order is universal, and a return to normalcy looks increasingly unlikely after the end of the crisis. Overreach has not been confined to regimes on the right to the political spectrum. The strictest lockdown measures to my knowledge have been put in place in socialist Spain. The states have not only been accumulating more power: they have also used the emergency to tax the citizenry. There is a lot of talk new taxes and the firing of civil servants in many countries. In Hungary, too, the government has raised, or is in the process of increasing, taxes, both on small business, such as bookstores, gas stations and pharmacies, and large international companies, such as Amazon. Decree 46/2020 has destroyed data protection by giving the Minister for Innovation the right to access personal data allegedly to defeat the epidemic. Decree 47/2020 has undermined worker protections in the Labor Code. None of these measures have anything to do with the general health of the population.

While regrettable and harmful, these laws tend to follow a larger European and even global trend. There are two factors, however, which make the Hungarian case rare, if not unique. To my knowledge, only in Hungary, among all the European countries, did the parliament, via the Enabling Law, give the government the right to rule by decree, even after the passing of the emergency law. Second, while many countries have been using the military to enforce the lockdown, nowhere, to my knowledge, have military personnel been put in charge of hospitals. On the order of the health minister, military commanders have cleared 36,000 hospital beds, mainly by sending patients home. The move may have been part of the longer plan to downsize medical personnel and slim the health budget. Such a heavy-handed management style encourages overreach and abuse of power. To date, two hospital directors have been fired for refusing to follow the government's order and publicly expressing dissent. The government also added military commanders to the presidium of at least 150 companies deemed vital to national security during the epidemic.

Bonner Akademie: How have the Hungarians reacted to the new laws and government measures? Have they been welcomed or are they being viewed with worry?

Bodó: The population is divided over the new laws. However, the division is not new; recent debates have only widened existing divides. The supporters of the government feel that there is nothing wrong with these new laws; the oppositional parties, their supporters and a significant segment of the population (who have no stable party affiliation but still hate the government) believe that with the new laws a point of no return has been reached: they think that Hungary today is a dictatorship. The camps are barely able to communicate with one another: They read different newspapers, watch differ tv channels and understand basic political concepts, such as democracy, liberalism and nation, differently. The government is clearly popular: Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has more than 1 million Facebook followers. It seems that the government's popularity has been increasing among the elderly in the recent weeks. They elderly seem to have been the most receptive to the image of the caring and paternalistic state and Prime Minister. One should exaggerate neither the government's nor Prime Minister Orbán's popularity with the general population, though. The convincing victory of the Fidesz at the polls in the last ten years speak more about the incompetence of its opponents than about the population's support for the current government. With more bankruptcies, higher taxes and rising unemployment, public dissatisfaction with the political status quo is destined to grow.

Bonner Akademie: How does the Hungarian public feel about the constant and sharp criticism of their country voiced by other EU members? Is there a sentiment that Hungary is being judged too harshly?

Bodó: Hungary is a linguistic island: only a minority can speak a second language; an even smaller group read or watch foreign news regularly. The majority of tv and radio channels and newspaper outlets are either in government hands or in the hands of business groups who are sympathetic to the government. The official media pays little attention to public opinion and the image of Hungary and Hungarians in the neighboring states. Among the Western European countries, Germany occupies a special position. After Germany, the political elite respect the opinion of British and American governments and media the most. The European Parliament is regarded as a weak institution: opinions expressed at its session are seen, and dismissed, as biased and ill-informed: they are believed to be based on prejudices, ignorance, maliciousness and anti-Hungarian propaganda spread by the socialist and green parties. Those who support the government tend to accept this view of the EU, its institutions and critique of the Hungarian government. Those who oppose the government, on the other hand, generally welcome Western criticism; if anything, they think that Western criticism does not go far enough. The rest, the majority of Hungarians, is too preoccupied with everyday concerns to care. Hungarian nationalism is more likely to find an outlet in xenophobia and anti-Roma sentiment than in anti-EU rhetoric. Despite all the tensions with the West and the harsh critique of Brussels in the official media, the idea of the European Union as a shared home has remained popular in Hungary, even among the supporters of the government. There is no reason to think that this will change in the near future.