

## **The pandemic did not kill Hungarian democracy but exposed its fundamental problems again**

In February 2020, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán [said](#) that “even though the coronavirus attracts everyone’s attention now, the historically relevant challenge today is migration”. COVID-19 has exposed longer lasting political and institutional trends in Hungarian politics that have been operating along various gendered and racialized lines pertaining to exclusionary discourses on immigration. Orbán made his first official public statement regarding the looming pandemic in his usual Friday morning interview at Kossuth Radio that became an important mouthpiece of his ideology over the years. His initial statement evoked the now routine, state-led narrative against migration and emphasized a hierarchy of competing priorities of the state’s attention at the time.

As the public health crises slowly unfolded in March, several public announcements and decisions were made in relation to closing down the borders to prevent illegal immigration. The prime minister's senior advisor on internal security, György Bakondi reiterated the usual governmental rhetoric on migration when he [said](#) in March that Hungary would bar asylum seekers from entering the transit zones at its Southern border. His statement draws on the readily available figure of the “migrant” as one of the national Others along with other practices of subordination. The governmental rhetoric about the looming health crisis and its efficiency in fear mongering in the country at the time of uncertainty of the global pandemic cannot be separated from building upon its permanently articulated crises of national borders in relation to immigration. The state-led discourses and actions to the COVID-19 crisis were intimately tied to other cycles of previous crisis rhetorics of contemporary Hungarian politics.

### **Contagious bodies and immigration**

The Hungarian public has been conditioned since the 2015 refugees crisis to respond to governmental messages concerning the “migrant”. As a result of the pervasive state-led othering processes and different sets of exclusionary practices, by the time the Coronavirus pandemic unfolded, a wide variety of racist narratives were readily available for processes of signification.

In line with the prime minister’s previous statement in the radio, György Bakondi made a clear connection between contagion and contagious bodies when he [said](#) that “there is a certain relationship between coronavirus and illegal immigration.” This connection has been emphasized several times throughout March as part of the state’s own dominant “[outbreak narrative](#)” to explain how the disease entered into Hungary, how it travelled internationally and globally, and how it could be contained. This narrative began with not only establishing the connection between immigration and communicable diseases in general, but specifically emphasizing that asylum seekers at Hungary’s Southern border are the carriers to blame, who had mainly come from Iran, one of the epicenters of the outbreak at the time. The language of biological contagion entered the well-established anti-foreigner public discourse as the prime minister [said](#) that “we

are facing an invisible and anonymous enemy”. The unregulated visibility of the virus has directed the government’s long standing anxiety around promoting a normative sameness of ideal political subjects at ordering, confining, and eventually containing its unruly subjects. The containment of the virus narrative has been intimately tied together with containing the state’s alleged enemies. As Orban [said](#) in one of his morning radio interviews, “there is an enemy here that we cannot defeat and destroy so we have to live with it for now...living with the enemy is not great, it has to be erased and stepped on, and when there is available vaccine, weapon then we will impale this virus”. The language of warfare has inextricably entered the linguistic fields of both crises and the state’s purported enemies as well as the assumed overlap between those two.

The government’s seemingly abstract figure of the migrant was tailored to be used in a concrete case of legally residing foreign student visitors in relation to the outbreak narrative. The state’s narrative continued with identifying and singling out two Iranian medical students returning to Budapest after the winter break who tested positive for COVID-19. In a few days, more students were identified from Iran who either tested positive for the coronavirus or were identified as being in contact with others who tested positive, and they were obliged to stay and to be surveilled in a state-ordered quarantine in a separated public hospital room. As several journalists [reported](#), some of the quarantined individuals were locked in together in the same room with a student who was known to have tested positive for the virus by the medical staff, but they were not provided with information about the student’s COVID-19 status. It was [reported](#) that the medical staff specifically told the person who tested positive to not inform others who were staying in the same room about his status. As a result of these conditions, upon being informed about the circumstances, some of the students wanted to leave the quarantine room and demanded safer treatment by the medical professionals in the health care facility.

According to the police lieutenant, Robert Kiss who [reported](#) about the case, “the Iranians displayed blatantly antisocial, violent behavior”. This trope of denoting “unruliness” of certain bodies is recurrent in both current and historical government discourses such as in the case of anti-Roma racism both in Hungary and in the larger European context. As a result of the alleged breach of the quarantine rules, the Hungarian state [confirmed](#) and ordered to expel and deport 13 Iranian students in relation to them protesting and violating the rules of the state-ordered quarantine and for allegedly [“endangering the public health”](#).

Singling out Iranian students publicly [took place](#) during the daily Coronavirus Operative Staff announcements, where the most pressing medical statistics, public health regulations and changes of everyday policies were supposed to be shared with the public pertaining to the pandemic. These students were publicly targeted as the alleged sources of both the pandemic outbreak in Hungary as well as the unruly opponents of the state’s unregulated measures of confinement. The ways in which state-led racism came about in this particular case, fit smoothly in the intensifying scapegoating practices of the government against both external and internal enemies.

This public portrayal of contagious bodies was strategically conflated with the purported dangerousness of immigrant bodies. No one else has been reportedly singled out among those who violated the rules of state-ordered quarantine practices even though there have been approximately [45 thousands cases](#) of breaching these rules by the beginning of May. What allowed state authorities to construct the pandemic outbreak narrative so efficiently is that it has been in line with the state's fear mongering communication practices in the past decade.

### **The bravest 133 men of the country**

The solidification of the state-led outbreak narrative was enabled by not only the majorly government dominated public media practices of the ruling parties but by the constant mediation of the government's measures on social media that has become a central daily routine of Hungarians. Throughout March and April the prime minister's Facebook page has become one of the main and most popular sources of governmental public announcements. There were occasions when [more than a million spectators](#) tried to watch simultaneously his live announcement and the social media platform either froze as a result of it or there have been audio failures of his live videos. These technical failures were also subject to some form of public mockery, which does not necessarily mean that the impact of Orban's completely overwhelming online media presence did not have serious consequences.

Besides the wide outreach of Orban's social media announcements, he also visibly took control over the outbreak narrative with one of the last frontiers of state capture of social means of communication. The governmental response to the pandemic and the uncertainty around the virus has not only personalized public actions of the state, but also contained in our newsfeed who can communicate publicly about the crisis and who cannot. Orban was setting up his own [Action Groups](#) to fight the pandemic and visited several medical facilities on his own to continue and mediate his own outbreak narrative via social media. This political communication machine has had a major role in naturalizing these public activities of the prime minister on an everyday basis.

In tandem with the construction, mediation and solidification of the state's racist outbreak narrative, the pandemic exposed the fundamental problems with the current stage of Hungarian democracy. On March 20th Judit Varga, Minister of Justice [submitted a bill](#) to the National Assembly that proposed to give sweeping power to the Hungarian government to make decisions by decree without needing the approval of the National Assembly.

The us versus them narrative once again was an essential rhetorical tool for Orban when in his speech concerning the bill, he complimented all of his presiding MPs whose votes he needed for passing the new rule-by-decree legislation. He [said](#) that "the opposition is afraid of something but that is their issue. I need 133 brave persons now, the bravest 133 of the country. You are those men sitting at the governmental side of the parliament". This compliment was merely part of Orban's technique of illiberal governance that staged its concept of democracy as if it required parliamentary approval of governmental decisions.

Even though the opposition protested against this move, on March 30th, the National Assembly eventually [passed the bill](#) with the governing majority and authorized the prime minister to rule by decree. The specific goal of this authorization was manifested in the government's actions the next day when an [omnibus bill package was submitted](#) to the parliament. What loosely connected the series of these legislations was the fact that without the looming health crisis, these exclusionary and strategically anti-oppositional legislations could have evoked a much greater resistance both locally and internationally beyond the scope of observations from one's screens. When on May 1st the prime minister [said](#) that "the first battle against the coronavirus has been won" as the virus has been contained and the country is prepared to manage the pandemic, that also shed light on the government's overwhelming role in containing the potentially viral nature of dissent and difference, whether displayed as immigrant bodies or as dissenting voices.

Controlling the dominant narrative of winning the "battle" against the virus seems to be a core element of simultaneously legitimizing Orbán's rule with or without this special authorization. In this set up, the containment of the virus and the safety of the political community are constructed to be dependent on the containment of the illiberal regime. This state-led narrative of the COVID-19 outbreak not only exposed the already existing frontiers and limits of democratic politics in the country, but solidified these power relations through legitimizing restrictive measures whenever it is deemed necessary by the state. Meanwhile, a new bill was [proposed](#) by Zsolt Semjen deputy prime minister on May 26th about [ending this special authorization of the government](#) on June 20th, while allowing the possibility of renewing this sweeping power without further parliamentary authorization in case of any public health emergencies in the future. This governmental decision could not only allow the state to potentially set up its own conditions to justify its swinging from state of "normalcy" to state of emergency and vice versa, but it could also enable the state to crack down on individuals and ideas that are deemed to be contagious and therefore subject to further regulations and containment.