HUNGARIAN CULTURE WAR IN THE COVID ERA: WHAT IT WAS, WHAT IT WASN'T, AND WHAT IT COULD HAVE BEEN

By Anna Réz

The restrictive regulations and vaccine policies imposed in response to the COVID-19 virus sparked widespread ideological disagreements and controversies in many countries, and Hungary was no exception. These conflicts, which infected the public discourse—including political and social commentaries written by journalists, mass public opinion expressed on social media, and, most worryingly, people's most intimate relationships—bear significant resemblance to what social scientists would label as a culture war.

In Hungary, however, there was no culture war—at least in the usual sense. Both Fidesz-KDNP, the ruling coalition since 2010, and its liberal-leftist opposition (united for the 2022 general election) promoted lockdown and vaccination policies, although with somewhat different tones and to somewhat different degrees. In fact, the two major political sides competed to outstrip each other's sincere concern for the life and health of the Hungarian people: while the opposition constantly and vehemently accused the ruling party of irresponsibly failing to protect people by not introducing more regulations (and sooner), Fidesz ran a campaign at the beginning of 2021 labeling the opposition parties "anti-vaxxers" because they protested against the rollout of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine, which these parties claimed was ineffective. Only the extreme right-wing party Our Homeland protested against the Covid measures, primarily against mandatory vaccination policies for some professions and vaccine passports. Our Homeland had no representatives in the Hungarian Parliament in this period, but established a parliamentary presence shortly thereafter, in the general elections of 2022.

Skepticism of Covid Measures: An Anti-Establishment Enterprise

So there was no culture war—at least not between the established conservative and progressive political parties. Hence, a puzzle arises: if all the established political actors and the vast majority of mainstream news outlets supported restrictive regulations and communicated that COVID-19 posed a serious threat to people's life and health, then why did people experience bitter controversies surrounding Covid policies? Who fought with whom? And why, even though virtually every opinion leader and elected politician encouraged people to get vaccinated, have one in three Hungarian adults never been vaccinated? (This proportion is similar to other countries in the region, but significantly lower than in Western European countries.)

Several studies (e.g., Bíró-Nagy 2022, Kutasi et al. 2022, Goodwin et al. 2022, and Farkas et al. 2022) have attempted to answer these questions, although within a specific theoretical framework. Comprehensive attitudinal studies exploring opinions about *both* social distancing measures (lockdowns, school closures,

1

curfews) *and* vaccination policies are scarce. Most studies have focused on the causes of vaccine hesitancy—partly because Hungary was one of the few countries where the *type* of vaccine recommended (Chinese/Russian versus European/American products) became a political battleground in itself. The results lead in the same direction: while supporters of mainstream political parties were generally willing to accept *some* vaccine (Fidesz voters being even more committed to vaccination than supporters of the united opposition), those who were politically undecided or scored low on general trust in social, political, and scientific institutions were much more hesitant to be vaccinated at all. Quantitative studies and analyses of political discourse point to the same conclusion: virus, lockdown, and vaccine skepticism had a distinctly anti-establishment character. This holds true for political representation as well as media consumption habits. On the one hand, skeptical views were represented politically by the fringe of the extreme far right (which at that time lacked parliamentary representation) and typically held by undecided voters. On the other hand, skeptical viewpoints and "unorthodox" scientific results were typically spread via smaller, less prestigious, and less reliable online platforms (websites and Facebook groups) as opposed to mainstream print and online media outlets.

The studies cited above highlight important connections between general trust level and hesitancy to receive COVID-19 vaccination. However, by focusing exclusively on the vaccination debate, we run the risk of misconstruing the ideological controversies surrounding Covid measures. Most analyses represent the debate as one between "science believers" and "science skeptics." This general narrative was present from the early days of the pandemic. Mainstream discourse on Covid measures implicitly or explicitly assumed that restrictive policies could and should be based on the evidence and knowledge provided by life scientists, most prominently virologists, epidemiologists, and medical professionals. Consequently, the assumption that acceptance of these regulations—and obedience to them—depended on people's scientific knowledge and trust in science has rarely been contested. This presumption has been reflected in the degrading expressions frequently used to describe those skeptical about restrictive policies: "lunatics," "conspiracy theorists," "conteo believers," "science deniers," etc. Consequently, skeptical viewpoints have been and often still are explained, in social science studies as well as in the public discourse, by low level of education, pathological psychological profiles (such as "paranoia"—see Bíró-Nagy 2022), lack of critical thinking and fact-checking skills, or political conservatism (although the latter is clearly not applicable in the case of Hungary, where Fidesz voters were the most committed to vaccination).

Culture War: How It Was and Wasn't

From here on, my discussion becomes somewhat speculative. I am a philosopher, not a social scientist, so the best I can strive for is to be consistent with existing results from attitudinal studies while at the same time departing from the dominant narrative, which has affected both the public discourse and the direction of empirical studies conducted in and about the Covid era.

My hypothesis is that the general mistrust in science that became visible in the vaccine debate was not an independent disposition some people already possessed (due to their educational level, political affiliation or psychological profile), but at least partly the *result* of the dominant mainstream national and international discourse about the COVID-19 virus and the regulations that attempted to mitigate the harms it caused. It is worthwhile to note that the first wave of the vaccine rollout occurred after several months of severe restrictions and an almost exclusive public focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. I suspect that many people were generally unsatisfied by and frustrated with the drastic, often poorly justified, and seemingly *ad hoc* regulatory measures that the Hungarian government introduced from March 2020. Although reliable data on attitudes related to lockdown policies are scarce, one survey conducted at the time of the first vaccine rollout found that 62% of respondents would modify or abandon the curfew regulations. Mainstream media outlets and established political parties did not give voice to these frustrations and complaints; on the contrary, opposing and skeptical

voices were regularly suppressed and banished in the name of science and morality. Since the key mainstream narrative was built on the idea that far-reaching social and political decisions that directly and drastically affected people's everyday lives could be justified *solely* by life-scientific facts and predictions, those who opposed these measures assumed they could only push back by denying these scientific facts and predictions. Many of them accepted the narrative of their opponents, since no one articulated their concerns in a different conceptual framework, and so they became what they were accused of being: science skeptics.

I am primarily interested in what this different conceptual framework could have looked like—that is, how concerns about the Covid measures could have been articulated on their own terms, without entering into an unpromising debate about life-scientific facts. Most of these concerns *were* in fact articulated by public intellectuals from all political sides—but these scattered criticisms did not add up to a real ideological alternative to the mainstream narrative.

Before I outline the alternative, I would like to briefly return to the concept of culture wars. Although it is common to identify culture wars by reference to the participants in the debate (i.e., conservatives and liberals, as understood in the US), it would be fruitful to revise and supplement this definition. Culture wars have a characteristic emotional dynamic, which makes them an easily recognizable and distinctive social phenomenon. Culture wars typically invoke intense emotions on both sides of the debate and these sentiments (typically anger, resentment, and a sense of justice or righteousness) even intensify as the culture war unfolds. Such emotions rely on evaluative judgements about what is fair, natural or decent, as well as on often vague assumptions about how our social reality works and should work. The dominant emotions of culture wars are backed up by a complex web of thoughts, empirical observations, and value statements. For those who become invested in culture wars, these evaluative judgments are of central importance to their worldview.

What counts as central is obviously dependent on the ideological-political context, which continually shapes these values and their relationship to each other. But some parts of our value system are likely not so directly influenced by the political messages we get. All of us assume some facts to be certain and some values to be the correct ones: about the value of life and death, the nature and importance of human relationships, the role that the state should or should not play in our lives, etc. These assumptions are often hidden and unarticulated until they become contested by others—and even when they do, it can be difficult to express them as clear theoretical or normative statements. When political actors lay the ground for a new culture war, they both rely on these unarticulated assumptions and interpret them in a specific way. A vague sense of cultural pride can easily be turned into xenophobic sentiments; the desire to remain open and flexible to new ideas and social changes can present itself as moral and social contempt toward those who cannot or do not intend to "catch up."

My central assumption is that culture wars both exploit people's deeply held beliefs and distort these beliefs by interpreting them in a specific way. In the process, unarticulated values and convictions become articulated—but at the same time they often lose their complexity and might even change their emotional character. Positively charged emotions such as pride, a sense of identity or a sense of belonging can transform into hostile sentiments toward "outsiders"; the compelling desire to create a just world can manifest itself as ridicule and impatience toward those who have different priorities.

Now I am in a better position to reformulate my prior thesis. The pandemic and the regulatory measures responding to it have mobilized a wide set of (often implicit and unarticulated) thoughts and judgements. This is hardly surprising: while the pandemic itself confronted us with our basic human condition and provoked thoughts about life, death, and loss in general, the regulatory measures raised complicated questions about

personal liberty and collective responsibility, about the role of human relationships in our lives, and about how a good life can be achieved under extraordinary circumstances.

With respect to these fundamental issues, our society is obviously divided. While the majority of people thought (out of either sincere conviction or political loyalty) that the way mainstream political actors responded to the pandemic matched their values and priorities, a significant minority (typically those without strong political commitments) was frustrated because the Covid measures conflicted with some of their implicitly held convictions, which are central to their worldview. Thus, according to my preferred definition, there *was* a culture war in Hungary—and one that did not take place along the lines of political affiliation. However, those unsatisfied with the mainstream narrative could not find strong enough representatives to give coherent content and voice to these convictions. Consequently, they had to rely on the opponent's narrative and take up the role created for them: that of "science deniers."

How a Real Culture War Would Have Looked: A Philosophical Speculation

Finally, I would like to discuss some central features of the mainstream narrative and show how a values-driven response to these ideological stances could have looked. Although all the building blocks of the following thoughts have previously been shared publicly, I believe they deserve a more systematic expression, which is what I attempt in the rest of this piece.

Uncritical Trust in the Current Results of the Scientific Field

Covid measures in Hungary, as in most European countries, were selected and imposed on the premise that political decision-making must rely on the scientific evidence available at the time. Drastic decisions regarding school closures, mandatory working from home, and the availability of important services were made in a rush and in an unpredictable manner on the basis of virological models, case numbers, and fresh studies regarding immunity, new virus mutations, etc.

The underlying assumption was that science was our "best shot" at doing things right. However, given the complexity of the issues surrounding a global pandemic and the limited scientific knowledge we had at the beginning of the pandemic, it could reasonably have been argued that our best shot was still *not a very good shot*. Science in the making is prone to the same biases and mistakes as virtually all human enterprise. Scientific research is influenced by the budget available; the broader aims of the funders; and the scientific consensus, which is shaped not only by rational reasons, but also by scientific trends, peer pressure, and political-ideological considerations.

Given the unreliability arising from these well-known sociological aspects of the scientific field, complete reliance on recent scientific data could reasonably have been contested. Now, just three years later, no one denies that lockdowns and social-distancing regulations had complex and far-reaching economic, psychological, and social consequences. These consequences could have been better taken into consideration in advance if political action had not been justified almost exclusively by reference to life-scientific results and predictions.

That the scientific field is prone to fallacies is a widely accepted sociological fact among social theorists (see the works of, for example, Bruno Latour and, most recently, Ioannidis 2022 on the unreliability of research findings). What makes science, in the long run, the most reliable source of information is its *method* and capacity for *self-correction*, not its immunity from momentary human failures, viciousness, and biases. Given these inevitable challenges, a sensible anti-lockdown argument would have promoted, as a precaution, the relative

prioritization of economic, psychological, and broader social-scientific considerations in political decision-making.

Admittedly, the social sciences are just as prone to making mistakes as the life sciences. What a more holistic and comprehensive approach could have achieved is a more balanced public discourse; probably a more modest and predictable strategy for fighting the most devastating effects of the pandemic; and the avoidance of the worst long-term consequences, such as a rapid rise in the share of mentally ill children, which has been frequently reported since the beginning of the pandemic.

Techno-Optimism

The Covid era was a golden period for the [tech industry](#). The most radical restrictive measures, such as school closures and the limitation of offline work, were imposed under the assumption that online technological tools could provide a meaningful substitute for previously offline activities. Entire industries (restaurants, cultural institutions, etc.) were forced to find new, Internet-based solutions in order to survive. Some of these changes seem to have had a lasting effect: online meetings, conferences, and trainings; streaming culture; and delivery apps are likely here to stay.

Many might be skeptical of the claim that technological innovation and online tools can meaningfully substitute for previously offline activities and ultimately lead us to a better society. First, an extensive literature explores the risk that technological innovation might lead to a form of digital authoritarianism and ultimately to a previously unprecedented level of political and social control. Second, from the standpoint of social equality, one can point out how rapid technological changes disadvantage those who do not possess the financial means or the digital competences to "catch up." Third, one can attribute intrinsic value to connections experienced in-person, from the most formal to the most intimate, arguing that any life worth living includes real-life communities where we confront and embrace other people as a whole, including their physical presence and often inadvertent behavior. And fourth, one can simply question the capacity of human beings to adapt to such rapid technological changes and fear the potentially harmful long-term social and psychological effects. It is worth noting that while the first and the second insights usually come from leftist thought, the third and the fourth can rightly be characterized, in the present political context, as conservative concerns. These worries could have formed separate lines of argument in public political discourse.

The State of Emergency and the Suspension of Individual Rights

Covid-era regulatory measures limited and threatened central civil and political rights in Hungary as well as in other countries: the right to free movement, the right to free (political) assembly and association, and the right to bodily autonomy (in the case of mandatory vaccination policies and vaccine passports) were severely curtailed. The Hungarian Parliament operated, for most of 2020, 2021, and until June 2022 under the "danger of crisis," special state-of-emergency legislation. Parliamentary legislation was mostly substituted by government decrees through a sweeping takeover of the executive branch ([Drinóczi 2020 et al](#).). Since 2010 parliamentary deliberation has gradually lost, due to the political maneuvers of the Orbán regime, its potential to exercise political control over the ruling party—but statutory legislation took this process to the next level.

In view of the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Orbán regime, the united opposition and other critics of the regime regularly accused the government of abusing the special powers conferred upon them by the "danger of crisis" to pass regulation in virtually no time and without parliamentary deliberation. However, the regulations contested by the parliamentary opposition were never related to the pandemic—since with regard

to Covid restrictions, as previously noted, there was no major disagreement between the ruling coalition and the leftist-liberal opposition. (Where there was disagreement, it was due to the opposition's demand for increasingly radical restrictions.) The legal justifiability and proportionality of these regulatory steps were questioned only by a few public intellectuals (Schiffer 2021, Bakó 2020), who are as critical of the Orbán regime as they are of its opposition.

These legal worries could have been turned into a more general, more values-based discussion about the boundaries and normative implications of the "danger of crisis" narrative. By radically curtailing individual freedom, the government not only took often-disputable stands on the relative importance of human rights, but also disrespected people's way of life in general. These regulatory steps actively prohibited most forms of leisure activities, cultural activities, and the nourishment of close human relationships. These prohibitions seemed warranted for those who accepted that surviving the COVID-19 virus should be our collective priority. But for those who either found the danger less extreme or simply prioritized sustaining their regular way of life over avoiding the virus, these restrictions expressed a deep disregard of those activities and human relationships that gave their lives value. Although these policies were meant to protect people from each other, and thus were built on the idea of mutual solidarity rather than on the paternalistic goal of "saving people from themselves," this was no consolation for those who would have chosen their usual way of living over being protected.

As I previously noted, most of these ideas have been expressed by a handful of public intellectuals in Hungary. Classical liberal as well as leftist authors emphasized the importance of more cautious and comprehensive decision-making and a healthy level of suspicion of brand-new empirical data. Primarily leftist thinkers highlighted the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies during the Covid era, the deep alienation that it both expresses and perpetuates, and the devastating effects of lockdowns on the working class. Legal and quasi-legal worries about the justifiability and proportionality of Covid regulations were also frequently expressed, with different political overtones.

These individual contributions did not, however, add up to a sensible counternarrative that could have articulated these concerns, which instead became expressed in vaccine hesitancy and bitter controversies offline and online. In conclusion, I would like to suggest some possible reasons why it happened thus. First and foremost, the level of political polarization in Hungary makes it very hard to create successful political narratives without political representation. Once it became clear that the established political actors and media outlets were not motivated to question the mainstream narrative, frustration found a home in the anti-establishment, embracing a mainly anti-intellectualist and apolitical opposition driven by suspicion about scientific facts. Second, this lack of reasonable criticism of Covid measures was not a local phenomenon. Public intellectuals, such as Byung Chul Han or Giorgio Agamben, who questioned the standard narrative about the pandemic and restrictive policy measures have often faced hostility and isolation. No sensible counternarrative could have been borrowed and imported.

This failure has had unfortunate consequences. First, those who turned to the anti-establishment political fringe will probably stay there. Most online platforms and "news sites" that promoted Covid-skeptical content in Hungary between 2020 and 2022 provided unreliable information: fake and highly misleading scientific news and conspiracy theories. Since the restrictions have been lifted and public attention has turned from the pandemic to new topics, these platforms have mostly survived and found new targets—broadcasting, for instance, pro-Russian propaganda and news on the war in Ukraine. Their audiences have followed their lead, remaining "hooked up" to unreliable sources.

Second, the fact that anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination sentiments failed to evolve into a sensible ideology makes it incredibly hard to adequately analyze and evaluate what we have been through in the last three years. Despite our ideological and lifestyle differences, the Covid era *was* a collective experience: frustrating, painful, disturbing, threatening or simply incredibly weird. How can we create a meaningful discussion about it now that we have run out of narratives?