

## **Krekó Peter: Mainstreaming Extremism: How Illiberal Governance Radicalizes the Political Center**

Since Viktor Orbán's return to power in 2010, Hungary has undergone a distinctive form of political transformation in which radical-right ideology has not disappeared but has instead been absorbed, normalized, and institutionalized by the governing mainstream. Earlier far-right challengers—most notably, Jobbik, but to a certain extent, Mi Hazánk as well—have become politically marginalized not because radical ideas lost societal appeal, but because the governing party, Fidesz, successfully co-opted large parts of the far-right's rhetoric, policy agenda, and symbolic repertoire, integrating them into state-backed discourse and governance (Krekó & Mayer, 2014; Political Capital, 2023). This process represents a shift from the radicalization of fringe actors to the radicalisation of the mainstream.

Drawing on empirical findings from representative public opinion surveys conducted in Hungarian election years (2018, 2022, and 2026), this chapter demonstrates that the social costs of this strategy have been substantial. While radical-right parties weakened electorally, radical, Manichean, and violence-justifying attitudes increasingly diffused into the broader electorate, including among supporters of mainstream parties. Indicators of affective polarization, political tribalism, and the moralization of political conflict show a clear upward trend, accompanied by growing tolerance for political aggression and the justification of violence against perceived political enemies.

Importantly, this process is asymmetric but not exclusive. Levels of authoritarianism, Manichean worldviews, and acceptance of political violence remain higher among government supporters, yet opposition electorates have also displayed significant increases over time—suggesting a dynamic of competitive radicalization rather than one-sided extremism. These findings are consistent with earlier evidence that political radicalisation (including tribalism) in Hungary is best understood not merely as populism, but as a broader psychological syndrome combining authoritarianism, identity fusion, and moral absolutism, amplified by an illiberal information environment (Krekó, 2020; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018). The chapter tries to embed these developments in the social psychological literature of insecurity, motivated cognition, and system justification. Building on Forgas's work on the psychology of insecurity and motivated social judgment, the analysis highlights how prolonged exposure to perceived threat, uncertainty, and normative breakdown fosters a preference for cognitive closure, black-and-white thinking, and affect-driven political judgments (Forgas, 2023; Forgas & Crano, 2011, 2019). In illiberal contexts, such as Hungary's informational autocracy, these mechanisms are further reinforced by state-sponsored narratives that normalize conflict, delegitimize pluralism, and reframe democratic backsliding as moral necessity (Hadarics & Krekó, 2025). The chapter also connects mainstream radicalization to pathways toward political violence, drawing on evidence that right-wing authoritarianism strongly predicts the justification of intergroup violence in Hungary, even more than general protest radicalism (Farágó, Kende, & Krekó, 2019). As political competition becomes framed in existential and moralized terms, democratic opponents are increasingly perceived not as rivals but as enemies, lowering normative barriers against coercion and aggression - which is not necessarily physical, but can be symbolic and verbal. The relationship between these facets is still not crystal clear, despite decades of research and theorizing- mainly due to the context-dependent nature of manifestation of political aggression.

Finally, the chapter outlines potential trajectories of further radicalization or deradicalisation in the aftermath of the 2026 parliamentary elections, arguing that unless institutional, media, and normative safeguards (political norms imposed by the elites) are restored, the continued interaction of insecurity, tribal identity, and polarizing nareratives may deepen democratic

erosion and can also catalyze outbursts of physical violence against scapegoats - even without a mass mobilization by extremist parties.

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