

The Hungarian Tragedy

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A nationalist conservative revolution has triumphed in Budapest; its leaders are busy dismantling constitutionalism and the rule of law. How could this have happened? And can the Western Left do anything about it?

There was a time when Hungary seemed the best hope for a liberal postcommunism. The country had produced some of the leading dissidents of the region in the 1970s and 1980s (such as ex-Marxist philosopher János Kis); civil society had developed rapidly even before the official end of state socialism in 1989. After the revolt of 1956 (which the Soviet Union brutally suppressed), the Hungarian government had slowly liberalized, introducing “goulash communism” and inverting the old totalitarian maxim to read: “who is not against us, is with us.” To be sure, state socialism was discredited—but not ideals of social justice.

The transition from state socialism was not only gradual—it was to a significant degree initiated by the old regime. Even the old Stalinist constitution remained nominally intact, amended beyond recognition through carefully crafted compromises. Fundamental changes were made, but it was, in the words of the political scientist Andrew Arato, very much a revolution against The Revolution—that is to say, against the idea of revolution as a violent rupture with the past. For some time, it even seemed as if the mild-mannered Kis might be the first postcommunist prime minister. He was beaten by a Christian Democrat, but, typically, one who had been trained as a historian and who in a different world probably would have been a university professor. As in other Central and East European countries, it was the hour of the intellectuals.

Hardly anyone could have imagined, then,

that twenty years later Hungary might be the first postcommunist country west of Minsk—and the first member state of the European Union—to slide back into authoritarianism. In April 2010, the conservative-nationalist Fidesz Party won more than two-thirds of parliamentary seats, replacing a socialist government that had been in power for eight years. Under the leadership of the highly charismatic Viktor Orbán, the party has begun systematically to remove checks and balances, to undermine the rule of law and effectively curtail the media. A new constitution this year is to top off a process that the *Economist* has called “Putinization.”

How could this have happened, after two decades of what seemed like fairly stable democratic rule? The immediate answer is that the Socialists not only led the country to the brink of financial disaster in 2009, but that the party was also morally discredited in a way that has few parallels in Europe. The prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, admitted in a secret speech to a party meeting in 2006 that he had been lying to the electorate about the dire financial situation of the country, that no European country had “done anything as boneheaded” as Hungary, and that it was time to tell citizens that their belts needed to be tightened—even if at the risk of losing the next election. Like all secret speeches, Gyurcsány’s remarks—littered with obscenities, to boot—became public. They provoked huge and violent demonstrations against the government, even if in retrospect they look like an admirable attempt at honesty (at least within his own party). Rather than resigning, the prime minister held on, implementing an austerity program, only effectively to hand over power to a “government of experts” (in fact, technocrats who were Socialists or all closely associated with the Socialists) in early 2009, after the country had to be bailed out by other European Union members. The experts

then pursued an even harsher economic policy.

More problematic still was what is widely perceived as years of Socialist corruption and clientelism. In the very same years, Socialist politicians were seen as mainly advancing the interests of major multinational corporations—and working hand in hand with neoliberal Brussels bureaucrats. Entry to the European Union in 2004 under Socialist auspices was widely perceived as having destroyed many local businesses. Gyurcsány himself is a millionaire who made his fortune in business before entering politics (or by mixing business and politics all along, as critics charge).

This disastrous combination—a left-wing party doing capitalism's bidding, while apparently helping party leaders enrich themselves—was not exclusive to the Socialists. The Free Democrats—once the party of the dissidents, which had nominated Kis for prime minister—governed with the Socialists until 2008 and were tarred with the same brush: capitalism and corruption. As one of its leaders later admitted, “We had to pay the price of capitalism to put an end to the dictatorship. At first we were saying that it was a price that had to be paid, and then it was, alas, love for it.”

Intellectuals like the writer István Eörsi, who thought that their ideals had found a reliable advocate in what—to be sure—was always a minority party, turned their backs in disgust. Others never forgave the Free Democrats for forming a coalition with the Socialists, the successor party to the Communists who had persecuted the dissidents. The Free Democrats dissolved before the 2010 election; a new party—called “Politics can be different,” mixing a green and a liberal agenda—appealed to those who had once voted for them. But it was also suspected of being amateurish and too idealistic. To be sure, politics could be different, but in a way directly opposed to liberalism—both in the classical European and the contemporary American sense.

Politics Can Be Different

All this explains why the Left imploded in last year's elections. But it does not explain Putinization. For this we need to ask what Fidesz is and what makes it different from other conservative nationalist forces in Central and Eastern Europe. And we need to ask who Viktor Orbán is.

It's here that the Hungarian story has a truly tragic twist. For Orbán was once a fiery young liberal (though more in the European sense, shading into libertarianism). He had co-founded the Fidesz movement in the late 1980s—with Fidesz standing for “Alliance of Young Democrats.” When the founders said “young,” they meant it: nobody over thirty-five was to be a party member. Orbán had studied in the dissidents' “invisible college”; he first made a name for himself nationally when he appeared at the public reburial of Imre Nagy—the Socialist prime minister in power in October–November 1956, later executed—long-haired and looking rather Byronesque, called for the withdrawal of the Russians. One can debate how daring such a call was in the summer of 1989. But it certainly was a bravura performance.

Yet, this budding politician got nowhere with a liberal agenda. So Orbán changed course and reinvented Fidesz as a nationalist, morally conservative, and religious party. He resented being treated as a student movement leader by the established liberals in the Free Democratic Alliance. And he also seems to have concluded that in Hungary only control of all the levers of state power can yield lasting political success. Many of his former allies left and joined the Free Democrats, while Fidesz withdrew from the Liberal International. Orbán appeared to be vindicated in 1998 when Fidesz replaced a Socialist government (which had done more for marketization and privatization than the nominally right-wing parties). It came as a shock to the Fidesz leader when his party was defeated in 2002 and the Socialists took over once again. Orbán explained that “the nation” could not be in opposition and formed “civic committees” that were to mobilize civil society against the state. In a twisted way, he seemed to be using a dissident strategy in what had become a fairly stable liberal democracy.

Equating Fidesz with the nation as such foreshadowed what Orbán has been doing since his election victory last year: a “national revolution” in the name of “national values,” namely “work, home, family, health, and order.” The election, according to the Fidesz leader, had signaled the formation of a “national center” and given a mandate for a “system of national cooperation.”

All the nation-talk reveals a profoundly problematic characteristic of Hungarian political culture: a deep-seated nationalism and a feeling of resentment and victimization that goes back at least to the post–First World War Treaty of Trianon and the huge losses of territory imposed by the Allies in 1920. Arguably, there has never been anything like a public “coming-to-terms with the past” that would allow Hungarians to accept their much-diminished political role in Europe. Instead, nationalism reaches deep into the supposedly bourgeois moderate center. In fact, it partly defines that center; when I lived in Hungary toward the end of the last decade, I was struck by the many bumper stickers that depicted the shape of Hungary in the borders of 1918. People would explain that this was not a call to annex Croatia and parts of Romania, but merely a sign of pride in what a great country Hungary had once been. In a spa in Sopron, close to the Austrian border, a very wealthy-looking family man would take everything off—except a silver chain around his neck with a medallion in the shape of Greater Hungary. He explained to this ignorant foreigner that he was the star in a widely popular nationalist rock opera about the great Hungarian past.

But this rather abstract and nostalgia-driven nationalism also has an ugly face: that of Jobbik, an extreme right-wing, anti-Roma and anti-Semitic party that placed third in the 2010 elections, just after the Socialists. Jobbik has a paramilitary unit, the Hungarian Guard, which has been officially banned but keeps reappearing in new guises. I often saw young people dressed in the Guard’s tell-tale black shirts (yes, black shirts) and with knives on their belts that supposedly are ancient Hungarian symbols—nationalism as a life-style.

Fidesz is officially committed to destroying

the extreme Right—after all, it’s in the party’s own electoral interest. But in many ways the seemingly respectable nationalism that Fidesz represents keeps legitimating the beliefs of Jobbik supporters. One of the first things Orbán did in power was to establish a Trianon memorial day; he also created a new kind of citizenship for ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring states, thereby stoking conflict with Slovakia in particular. In fact, he started nothing less than a comprehensive *Kulturkampf*, arguing that Fidesz had a mandate to reshape the political system according to the true values of the “national center” (and, to use a distinction prominent on the Hungarian Right, the “well-rooted” Hungarians, as opposed to the “foreign-hearted”). All public buildings were supposed to display a declaration of the “national values”; and these values—and an explicit endorsement of Hungary as a Christian nation—are to be at the heart of the new constitution.

This kind of rhetoric is, of course, a staple of populism: declare yourself the spokesperson of the people’s true voice or the faithful executor of the national will and claim that thereby you are the real democrat, as opposed to unelected bodies like courts and snooty urban elites of liberal journalists. Fidesz has been governing accordingly: it has tried to weaken all independent bodies charged with oversight of the government, curtailing the powers of the constitutional court (which had been closely modeled on the West German example). It also installed a man widely seen as a puppet figure, a onetime Olympic fencing champion, as president, replacing a former constitutional court judge who had once been supported by Fidesz but fallen out of favor, not least because he refused to display the declaration of the national revolution in the presidential palace. Most notably, the government passed a draconian media law, which the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has criticized as comparable to what we know from totalitarian regimes.

Is there a model for all this? Orbán has never mentioned Putin. But he openly admires Silvio Berlusconi. And maybe if Berlusconi had a two-thirds majority in the Italian legislature, some of his policies would be similar.

Or would they? There is another twist in the story here: Orbán keeps portraying the Socialists as the party of multinational corporations and Fidesz as the defender of ordinary folk from the forces of globalization. Even the most casual visitor to Budapest will understand why this plays well: in terms of brand names, the city feels like an economic colony of Germany and Austria—most of the major shops, from drugstores to supermarkets, are the same as in Berlin or Vienna. And Orbán's economic nationalism is not just rhetoric: he has put a levy on banks and is trying to reverse the privatization of pension schemes (again, initially introduced by the Socialists). The government officially has declared that the state should come before the market, and Orbán has talked about an as yet undefined form of "plebeian democracy."

A Different Kind of Populism

Fidesz, then, is pursuing its own nationalist "primacy of politics." But what is emerging in Hungary is not fascism, as some in the Western media have been too quick to conclude (a German paper—a conservative one, no less—called present-day Hungary a *Führerstaat*). It's the work of an immensely skilled, immensely power hungry politician who does not want to lose power again and is effectively building a one-party state. Tragically and paradoxically, Fidesz at the moment is polarizing—but without any opposite pole; the opposition remains dysfunctional and disunited, suffering another disastrous defeat in the local elections this past fall. Left-wing intellectuals, meanwhile, are protesting, to be sure, but seem to be in shock that all this could be happening (and that so many of their fellow citizens can be so easily swayed by a strong leader promising to restore the nation's grandeur).

Of course, the political analysis of Hungary is not exhausted by Orbánology. It is crucial to understand the nature of Fidesz's populism, and why it appeals to so many. Its ideology (and political strategy) is fundamentally different from two other versions of populism that have gained strength in Europe recently: the Berlusconi variety, on the one hand, and what I would call pseudo-liberal populism

shading into racism, on the other. Berlusconi wants Italian citizens to be passive consumers, spectators of politics (or even better, of his television shows). Pseudo-liberal populists like the Dutch politician Geert Wilders want to stoke fear and resentment vis-à-vis Muslims in the name of freedom, ostensibly identifying with Israel and making a point that they are not nationalists.

Orbán is different: he wants citizens to hold the right national values, but also to be engaged in politics; he wants them to conform to an ideal of what the Germans call *Bürgerlichkeit*—that is, an ideal of hard work, family values, and civic engagement. Fidesz appeals to a middle class that feels threatened by the economic situation, a middle class that ideally wants to be like German *Bürger*, or proper *polgári*, in the Hungarian phrase, which means different from the Roma and others who supposedly live off welfare, but also proudly standing up to foreign capital. When Hungary assumed the (automatically rotating) EU presidency this January, its program was precisely focused on values that Western Europe has supposedly forgotten, especially the moral worth of the nation.

And how has the EU responded to this authoritarian-nationalist-bourgeois vision that is supposed to protect the Hungarian nation from foreign capitalists (and the "foreign-hearted" within Hungary's own borders)? After all, the Union was supposed to "lock" post-authoritarian countries—first Greece, Spain, and Portugal in the 1980s, later the postcommunist states—into democratic commitments and protect rights with supranational institutions like the European Court of Justice.

Alas, European governments have been too preoccupied with the fate of the euro and their own economic woes to pay much attention to small neighbors about which many Europeans know next to nothing. When the Western European press finally started making noises in connection with the new media law, some left-wing politicians—including the foreign minister of Luxembourg and the leader of the Socialists in the European Parliament—asked loudly whether Hungary was suited to preside over the EU. Brussels itself began to scrutinize the media law, and it now

seems sure that Hungary will amend it in response to criticisms from the EU. Still, it has become painfully obvious that the Union has many instruments and incentives to get countries outside its borders to adopt liberal democracy but precious few for changing the behavior of governments on the inside. In the wake of the failed EU Constitution, the focus has all been on respecting national differences, emphasizing Europe's internal political diversity, and avoiding tough common European political standards. Tellingly, the latest European treaty—the quasi-constitution—has a provision for a member state to leave voluntarily, but no mechanisms for ejecting a country that has ceased to be democratic. True, there is the possibility of withdrawing voting rights from states that have violated the EU's "fundamental values," but no leading politician has even mentioned that possibility yet.

What Can Be Done?

What, then, can outsiders do? For one thing, concerned European citizens should make it clear that they regard the supposed "internal affairs" of another member state as their business, too. They should remember that theirs is not primarily an economic but a political union. It would leave a disastrous impression if the EU finally took some action, but only under pressure from the banks that have been complaining to Brussels about Orbán's "crisis taxes."

In practice, this means politicians and intellectuals must keep up the pressure via the international press and citizen demonstrations (as happened when protests against the media law outside the Budapest Parliament were paralleled by smaller gatherings in Vienna and Berlin). They can also support the initiatives of prominent Hungarians, such as the petition addressed to artists and intellectuals by the conductor Ádám Fischer and the pianist András Schiff, who also wrote an impassioned letter to the *Washington Post*. Above all, it means Western governments confronting Orbán directly on his record and, if he keeps defying his critics, boycotting the prestigious events that the country holding the EU presidency usually puts on. Withdrawing voting rights

should become a credible threat, too.

But it also means finding the right tone and, more important still, the right *theoretical* language to make the case to Hungarians. As the leftist philosopher G. M. Tamás, once a leading dissident alongside Kis, has pointed out, it will do no good if Westerners simply lecture his compatriots with liberal democratic pieties and pull out the handbook on "transitology" once more.

In the eyes of many Hungarians, what unfolded in the twenty years since state socialism *was* liberal democracy—and it has failed. In other words, the perception is that Putinization, a combination of somewhat authoritarian politics and state-supervised economics, is the only model that will ultimately work for ordinary people. In fact, some leading Hungarian intellectuals seem now to have all but accepted the notion that the country was never really democratic and might never get rid of the legacies of feudalism, self-pitying nationalism, and paternalistic state socialism. Some time ago, Tamás regretted that the seeming triumph of the dissidents' human-rights-centered liberalism in the early 1990s went hand in hand with inattention to the plight of the victims of post-communism and thus sowed the seeds of its own destruction. As he put it in 2009: "We, the froth at the top of it, were celebrating the triumph of freedom and openness and plurality and fantasy and pleasure and all that. That was frivolous, and I am deeply ashamed." That sense of the discrediting of the highest liberal ideals—that it's all just capitalism, in its worst, corruption-ridden form to boot—is the final element of the Hungarian tragedy.

To be sure, it is far too early for resignation, understandable as that might be in the face of widespread cynicism on both sides of the political spectrum and the seeming passivity of citizens witnessing Fidesz's dismantling of the rule of law. But a form of social liberalism (a term that primarily makes sense in the European context, where "liberalism" and social democracy have long been divorced) might yet be invented specifically for post-communist contexts. It would be a liberalism of fear, perhaps, that takes seriously the anxiety of people who feel they have been

robbed of their past, their international status, and, not least, their livelihoods; a liberalism that explains the long-term benefits of the rule of law beyond the economic advantages of getting into the EU. But in a sense the challenge of formulating an attractive, popular, but not populist, liberalism is not that different in the East and West. This is another reason why

Western intellectuals should not ignore a faraway country where liberal democracy might yet recover.

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Learning from the French Left: Lessons of the Pension Reform Battle

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"Check your Rolex. It's time for a rebellion." In the fall of 2010, protesters against the reform of the French pension system lacked neither catchy slogans nor energy. For more than a month, unionists and a variety of left activists organized strikes and demonstrations that brought up to three million protesters onto the streets and disrupted public transportation and schools. Strikes and blockades in oil refineries created a serious gas shortage. Opinion polls showed that a majority of the population supported the movement. At the demonstrations, the phrase *"Rêve générale"*—a pun on the French words for "dream" and "strike"—was ubiquitous on signs and stickers. The protests were also a merry affair, with the usual dose of balloons, food, and music that symbolize people's determination.

One did not need to march all the way to the Place de la République in Paris to sense the collective optimism that ran through the protests. Fueling the movement was the idea that the government's proposal to roll back the retirement age from sixty to sixty-two, allegedly to save it from financial collapse, was fundamentally unfair. In France, the right to retire at sixty is a fairly recent victory—it was enacted in 1981 by François Mitterrand's left-wing government—but it quickly became established as a social right. Although in the United States there were legal battles to

abolish mandatory retirement, many in France see retirement in a positive way. To some, it is the complement of the eight-hour day: it offers workers a kind of emancipation from wage work. For others, it produces solidarity between the generations. At a time when the Left is mostly a defensive movement, the right to retire at sixty is an important symbol of its past ability to craft social norms and to impose them upon the capitalist order. Mocking Nicolas Sarkozy's campaign slogan in favor of the work ethic—"work more to earn more"—protesters brandished signs proclaiming they should "work more to die before they retire."

In response, Sarkozy and his allies on the Right made a simple case: as people live longer, the pension system will come under increasing financial strain unless both the retirement age and the number of years one needs to be a net contributor to the system evolve. Common sense, not politics, they argued, drove the change.

But protesters rejected this logic. They argued that the reform would only be a temporary fix; it would protect the system only through 2018, and a new review will be held in 2013—after the next presidential election—to propose yet another plan. Moreover, they maintained, the reform is grossly unfair to women, who often stop working to raise children and are at a disadvantage when it comes to validating forty-one-and-a-half years of net contributions. It was equally unfair to workers who enter the