From Goulash-Communism to Goulash-Authoritarianism?

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Some Comments on Political Discourse and Regime-Building in Post-Transition Hungary [1]

The present situation in Hungary is a challenge for the model that has shaped the political life of Western Europe since WWII. The way the European Union handles the Hungarian issue has a significance that reaches well beyond the individual case of a minor East Central European state and might become an indicator of the direction European political culture will take in the decades to come.

The recent European debate on the political developments in Hungary, erupting after the controversial constitutional reform and the contested governmental practices of the Orbán-government, which came (back) to power in Spring 2010, has focused on roughly four issues. The first is the relationship of political rhetoric to the prime minister's alleged penchant for *Realpolitik*. To put it bluntly, when he talks – usually in front of a domestic audience – about the national community being constituted by blood ties, about the decline of Western civilization and the concomitant rise of China as the new model (as well as expressing manifest sympathy towards the political elites of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan), or about the return to a European order based on work and prayer, does he really 'mean' what he says? If so, this set of values seems to be at odds with the mainstream political culture of the European Union, which stresses civic rather than ethnic elements in the constitution of political communities, seeks to preserve the European social and economic 'model' that combines efficiency with human rights, and – while not negating the cultural importance of religion – separates religious norms and practice rather strictly from the political sphere. There are, however, many observers who point out that such claims form part of the common political toolkit of the new generation of populist politicians all over Europe, which ultimately caters to a certain type of electorate, but that apart from these propagandistic performances the Hungarian politician is a pragmatist who can be engaged in the usual 'tit for tat' mechanisms of European institutional politics.

The second issue concerns the purported logic of post-WWII European political system, according to which the alternation of governing parties gravitating toward the center conflicts with the apparent “systemic” aspirations of Orbán and FIDESZ. Is the unusual two-thirds governmental majority, which makes it possible to alter practically any rule of the political game (and, most importantly, to reshape electoral law so that, with 40 percent of the votes, it is possible to get over 60 percent of the places), an anomaly that will be corrected by the next election? Will the pendulum eventually swing back, sooner or later bringing a complete change of government? Or are we faced with the emergence of a political system comparable to Putin’s “sovereign democracy”, which respects the principle of democratic elections *pro forma* but, via administrative measures and media dominance, in reality makes it impossible for the opposition to overturn the government?

The third issue concerns the politics of the European Parliament, where, especially in the first two years after 2010, voting concerning Hungary drew a surprisingly rigid line between, on the one hand, the left and liberal parties and, on the other, the center-right and radical right. The discussion focused on the compatibility of FIDESZ with the European “family” of People’s Parties. Is FIDESZ merely a more emphatic and – for some Western neo-conservatives, more daring – edition of the centre-right popular party, in the context of the partial dismantling of the welfare state, or is it a radical right-wing formation that has nothing to do with the ideological tradition of Adenauer, Schuman and De Gasperi?

Last but not least, the debate on Hungary has once again posed the question of the European relevance of anti-communism, both in terms of memory politics and also with regard to the stance of the European political framework toward the pre-1989 continuities in the political system of most transition countries. Is anti-communism a constitutive element of the envisioned all-European political culture, in a similar way as anti-fascism, and if so, does it legitimize the fervent anti-communist rhetoric used in the struggles for power in the former Eastern Bloc countries after 1989?

In order to find adequate answers to these dilemmas, it is imperative in my opinion to offer a context-sensitive reconstruction of the configuration that emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century in Hungary. It is also important to stress that while the radicalism of some of the ideological tenets professed by the political and cultural circles around the Hungarian government might be not typical in European comparison, most of the constitutive elements of their rhetoric can be found in other national contexts as well. It thus becomes obvious that the emergence of this ideological configuration is part of a more general collapse of “consensus politics” characterizing the East Central European transition countries.

The late 1990s and early 2000s have been considered a period of social and political stabilization of the “Other Europe”, marked by a growing economic and institutional convergence with the Western part of the continent. At the same time, paradoxically, the ideological conflict between different political forces did not lose its intensity. Obviously, the “consensus politics” forced mainly by the prospect of European integration should not be confused with harmony. Already during the emergence of the new democratic system, deep ideological conflicts ravaged the political life of these countries. Nevertheless, in the early 1990s, personal and political cleavages notwithstanding, a relatively large segment of the new political elite, left and right, post-communist and anti-communist, still shared a common commitment to the necessity of the institutional reforms stipulated by the ‘transition paradigm’. This entailed the consensual aim of ‘getting closer’ to European structures and adopting European institutional practices, with their respect for democratic procedural rules, since they seemed to command social support and were also legitimized by the manifest historical victory of “Western” liberal democracy over “Eastern” communism. Most importantly, it entailed a certain propensity for “self-restraint” – both in terms of not using the full scale of administrative pressure available to a governmental party for reshaping the political system at the expense of the opposition and also in terms of a certain reluctance to develop the inflexible antipathies and ideological divisions that characterized the political cultures of these countries in the interwar period.

This democratic and Europeanizing “minimal consensus” was also linked to a critical stance toward pre-communist authoritarian political traditions and entailed the rejection of the personality cult of leader figures, even though it did not prevent the emergence of a number of semi-authoritarian leaders, propelled to power by a combination of

skillfully instrumentalized anti-elitism, a feeling of national and social insecurity, and the increasing popular frustration at institutionalist, and thus rather immobile, political arrangements. Simultaneously, most political forces stemming from the communist party were also eager to subscribe to some sort of liberal democratic ideological minimum – at least when the offer of European integration became a tangible incentive. This liberal framework seemed to be so dominant that, notwithstanding the quick disappearance of explicitly liberal political forces in most countries, many observers spoke of a liberal hegemony in East Central Europe. However all this became increasingly precarious in the late 1990s and, from the turn of the millennium onwards, the search began for a new ideological framework.

Beyond the inherent thrust toward political polarization, the erosion of post-1989 consensus politics can be linked to a series of divisive collective experiences in the respective political communities. The pervasive pro-Western European stance characterizing the early, naive stage of the transition, which was combined with very limited interaction with Western institutions, gradually started to change in the process of negotiation and adaptation to EU structures. Various frustrations with the pace and direction of the transformation came to be linked to perceived or real pressure from “the West”. This was coupled with increasing disaffection with the workings of a market economy, which, contrary to expectations, resulted in dramatic social differentiation and a marked disappearance of national sovereignty in the economic sphere in the face of the powerful multinational companies and transnational financial structures.

The transition societies also carried a number of unresolved historical traumas: the dramatic instability of state borders and the experiences of massive population transfers and displacements, especially during and after the Second World War; the Holocaust; the destructive effects of the socialist transformation with its concomitant campaigns of collectivization, “de-kulakization,” and forced industrialization; and, finally, the outbursts of mass terror as well as the complicated dialectics of compromise and resistance characterizing both the interwar authoritarian and the post-war communist regimes. In the heat of the search for future-oriented solutions in the early 1990s, these traumas remained to a large extent suppressed, but continued to feed the divergent ‘private histories,’ which could coagulate into competing alternative representations of the twentieth century that could be eventually played out against each other.

Naturally, the ideological components of this “politics in a new key” were drawn from different pre-existing reservoirs, ranging from the interwar constructions of national authenticity to the ideological debates of the anti-communist opposition circles. Thus, the new ideology questioning the legitimacy of the post-transition regime inherited some elements from the anti-communist discourse of the early 1990s but in many ways also went beyond it. Most importantly, it not only turned against the heirs of the communist power structures, but even more so against those former dissidents who abandoned the anti-communist platform and chose either to enter into an actual coalition with post-communist political forces or concluded that the post-transition context posed new challenges, foremost that of ethno-nationalism, and that the fight against the vestiges of the communist regime was no longer the most important task.

In contrast to the anti-communism of the early transition years, which stemmed from the fear of restoration and was rooted in a liberal, anti-totalitarian framework that functioned as a legitimizing factor for the new democratic regime, the new anti-communism was markedly anti-liberal and came to serve as an ideological framework questioning the legitimacy of the whole transition process. Significantly, the emerging intellectual formulations of this new anti-communism did not necessarily come from people who had been the most radical anti-communists during the earlier phase.

Another important aspect connected to all this was the seemingly paradoxical development triggered by the advancement of European integration and the dissolution of self-restraint on the part of political elites. Once the formal democratization criteria were met and the integration of most of East Central Europe into the European Union became irreversible, a majoritarian understanding of democracy and a concomitant zero-sum perception of political struggle became dominant in the political cultures of the region. All this led to the growing aggressiveness of political

discourse, culminating in constructed and sustained radical visions of mutual elimination – mobilizing one's own camp by accusing the ideological opponent of aiming at one's total destruction. The struggle was thus not framed in terms of political competition within a procedural framework of democracy which could allow for the clash of different visions of the future but would also make it possible to change direction over time. Instead, politics became represented as the clash of fundamentally incompatible *Weltanschauungen* that both aim at changing the outlook, and often the very composition, of the political community once for all. From this perspective, it became legitimate to prevent the breakthrough of the opponent by any means, including the subversion of the procedural structures mentioned above. The radicalization was also linked to the change in the horizons of expectation of the political community: while in 1989-90 a major factor of moderation was the fear of civil war between communists and anti-communists, the vestiges of this fear completely disappeared by the 2000s. What remained was a discourse of "secret deals", "embezzled transition", and the "betrayal" of the society by the transition elites.

The rejection of 'transition liberalism' on the basis of cultural, political and socio-economic arguments and the search for a new ideological framework putting the whole transition period into brackets became a central theme of public discourse in Hungary, which seemed to be the most eminent 'pupil' of Westernization in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This development can be followed in the shifting political discourse of intellectuals linked to FIDESZ, a party that in 1989-93 combined radical anti-communism with a liberal democratic vision of politics. By 1998, when Viktor Orbán became the prime minister of a right-wing coalition government, the liberal democratic element was minimized and the ideologists close to the leadership started to experiment with a right-wing republican discourse. They used the notion of 'citizen' as the central normative concept – not in the sense of the *citoyen* conscious of his/her civic rights but as a counter-concept of socialism. It was inspired by communitarianism, stressing organic social links in contrast to the 'mechanistic' social engineering of really existing socialism, combined with a dose of neo-liberalism, envisioning a new middle class not relying on the welfare system of the state but seeking to realize itself within the new framework based on private property. While 'citizen' was obviously meant as a counter-concept to the 'subject' of the communist regime and thus entailed a rejection of the recent past, it had limited historical referentiality. As this framework turned out to be unable to provide mass support for the government (due to the relatively high level of nostalgia for the welfare system of really existing socialism), Orbán and the intellectual circle around him opted for a more history-centered strategy of legitimization. This was indicated by the pompous celebrations in 2000 commemorating the millennium of Hungarian statehood. It also meant a powerful turn back to archaic symbols, pre-eminently the Holy Crown, which from a venerated but antiquated object was upgraded to serve as the official symbol of national unity and state continuity.

This discourse was radicalized even further after 2002, when FIDESZ unexpectedly lost the elections. Challenging the legitimacy of the socialist-liberal coalition government with an ethno-nationalist rhetoric (claiming that "the nation cannot be in opposition", which implied that the actual left-liberal government was a historical anomaly), the right-wing political and cultural elite sought to regain power by a wide-ranging social mobilization. The emergence of a national conservative parallel polis, based on local voluntary associations, the so-called "civic circles" – *polgári körök* –entailed among other things the creation of a concurrent cultural infrastructure (ranging from ideologically committed media to an alternative art academy) that would "re-conquer" the public sphere from the representatives of "alien interests". The underlying political discourse was a combination of fervent anti-communism, anti-liberalism, cultural traditionalism, statism, and an increasing ethno-nationalism targeting Hungarians living outside of Hungary as constitutive members of the Hungarian political community. In some ways they were described as more authentically Hungarian – since they have been protecting their identity from the dangers of assimilation for decades – than the "unconscious" Hungarians in the mother country.

After almost a decade of political mobilization and increasingly violent mass politics following 2006, the 2010 elections brought an absolute majority to Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ in Parliament (the party received 52 percent of the votes but, due to the electoral system, won 68 percent of the seats). The most important reason for this victory was arguably the gradual delegimitization of the socialist government, which had sought to implement a Blairite 'third way' agenda in the absence of a solid and relatively broad middle class, while also becoming involved into a series of corruption scandals which undermined the entire rhetoric of public sector reform. Another major blow was

obviously the gradually deepening global economic crisis, which reinforced the already tangible signs of economic downturn. As a result, the socialists lost most of their lower middle class electorate in the economically crisis-ridden areas of Eastern Hungary, where especially the population of the impoverished former centers of heavy industry, unable to profit from the conditions of market economy, had become increasingly alienated from the government and turned massively towards the extreme right. Rather than promising constitutional change, FIDESZ campaigned with an anti-corruption rhetoric and promised immediate measures to curtail unemployment to increase public security. After the victory, however, the election was reinterpreted as a fundamental break, a "polling booth revolution", supposedly ending two decades of corruption and disorientation and opening up the possibility of the creation of a completely new political-social order, which received the somewhat Orwellian name of "System of National Cooperation".

The Hungarian context is particularly interesting since it also entailed the internationalization of a local conflict. When European political actors and institutions began to criticize the controversial measures of the Orbán government, such as the media law or the introduction of a new basic law with a heavily ideological preamble, its propagandists sought to 'explain' to the Western public the underlying agenda of the government. They emphasized Orbán's anti-communism, referred to his carefully cultivated image of a radical revolutionary of 1989, and described his measures as the emancipation of the country from the political and economic dominance of (post-) communists.

The 'cultural turn' of the regime's ideological legitimization abroad coincided with the appearance of Orbán in the European Parliament facing the disapproval of socialist and green MPs, with the most fiery criticism being formulated by Daniel Cohn-Bendit. In response, Orbán started to talk about a fundamental cleavage between him and his critics, claiming to represent the "forgotten Europe" of Christianity, the family and national pride, which had been undermined by the Western 68ers as much as by Eastern Communists.

On the 'home front', the binary opposition of a 'cosmopolitan' Left composed of former dissidents and post-communists, allegedly representing the past, and a 'national' and future-oriented Right, became a central element of the official ideology of the "System of National Cooperation". It also provided discursive self-legitimization for the extreme right, concentrated in the parliamentary party *Jobbik*, that received almost 17 percent of the vote in 2010. This makes it possible for *Jobbik* to assume a complex political position – to criticize the government not for its program but for not pursuing the implications of its ideological commitments "consequently enough", thus providing a possible *Hinterland* for ideological mobilization in certain conflict situations. In contrast to the international self-legitimization of the Orbán government, which claims that the victory of FIDESZ saved the country from the rule of the extreme right, in reality there is a strong ideological entanglement between the two political forces, even though *Jobbik* is evidently provocative exactly in the areas (such as anti-Semitism) where the government is under the most obvious external pressure to comply with "European norms", at least rhetorically.

A distinctive factor of the system emerging in Hungary is the conscious mobilization of civil society even after the return to power of FIDESZ; this contributes to the atmosphere of "permanent revolution". As a matter of fact, these developments provide clear proof of the profound ambiguity of the notion of civil society, which in the context of the Eastern European transitions has for a long time been perceived as a key agent of democratization. On the contrary, what the last decade has shown is the immense power of a profoundly anti-liberal civic mobilization that has created an anti-democratic and often ethno-nationalist "parallel polis". Based on voluntary participation (albeit reinforced by the skillful management of mass demonstrations, using state money to transport the demonstrators to the right place, etc.), the membership of these associations were kept in a permanent state of mobilization via parallel channels of communication, collective rituals and symbols (usually linked to the interwar tradition of ethnic nationalism), and particular patterns of sociability and solidarity, and could thus be converted into the power bases of the government when their charismatic leader eventually came (back) to power.

An obvious link also exists between the discourse about the corruption of the transition elites, which supposedly subordinated the national interest to the promotion of global integration (in practice this meant dependence on foreign "financial circles"), and the current measures aiming both at the creation of a national entrepreneurial elite

close to the government and the complete dismantling of pro-Western cultural and educational frameworks. The professed aim of the educational reforms implemented in the last 3 years is to produce a new generation which accepts a much more hierarchical order, which internalizes traditional religious and gender norms, and which valorizes physical fitness over critical thinking. It is telling that, in a recent speech inaugurating the new school year, the secretary of state in charge of primary and secondary education recently stated that the most important teacher in the school is the gym teacher.

Overall, the neo-conservative ideological framework emerging in Hungary has come to question the entire transition process while seeking to offer a "more stable" framework of authority and identity. It has sought to replace the goulash-communism of Kádár with a new system that promises to "take care" of the needs of its subjects, in return for their relinquishing of democratic political control. This is so much so that during the last few years criticism of the communist regime as such has been considerably quieter than the criticism of the transition years. In a way it seems as if Kádár's paternalist, authoritarian socialism is more akin to the self-image of the "System of National Cooperation" than the "anomic" political life of pluralist democracy. This impression is reinforced by the government's co-opting of a number of symbolic and less symbolic figures of the communist regime (such as the "national communist" reformer and high-ranking member of the leadership of the 1980s, Imre Pozsgay, but also many rank and file bureaucrats, including the above-mentioned secretary of state with a strong Catholic-conservative agenda, Rózsa Hoffmann, who was not only member of the Party but also served as a senior bureaucrat of the ministry of education in the 1970s).

While the inspiration is most probably subconscious, the observer might also find a certain resonance, one that goes beyond the conceptual overlap, between the "Peace Marches" organized by a nominally civil society organization copiously funded by the current government and the "Peace Struggle" of the 1950s. Whereas the latter was a key trope of mass mobilization in Stalinist Eastern Europe, targeting the imperialist aggression of the West, the former brings together hundreds of thousands of Orbán's supporters by using an increasingly militant anti-colonial rhetoric aimed both against the internal traitors who want to "sell the country once again" to foreigners and against the European Union, which is presented as a new colonial empire that has taken the place of the Turks, Habsburgs and Soviets in suppressing Hungarian independence.

Of course, the more explicit historical model is the interwar period: references to the Horthy-regime as a period of stability and normality (after the "chaos" of the democratic revolution of 1918 and the communist takeover of 1919) are increasingly central to the self-legitimization of the government and its intellectual entourage. One of the most obvious parallels consists in Orbán's positioning of himself as a "dominant center" marginalizing both the left and the extreme right. In the interwar period, it was allegedly the mainstream national conservative elite that performed the same feat (at least until the late 1930s, although in the emerging official narrative the Horthy regime is credited with preserving the rule of law until the German occupation in March 1944, a historical artifice which ultimately seeks to avert responsibility for the persecution of the Hungarian Jews away from the Hungarian authorities). However, similar to the 1920-30s, the discourse and political agenda of this "dominant center" is more akin to that of the radical right than to the left and the symbolic dividing line is drawn between the "national" and "anti-national" forces.

Taking all this together, I would argue that it makes more sense to look at the system emerging in Hungary in systemic terms rather than as a set of disparate statements and improvised outcomes. By building a new institutional and ideological framework, the power elite seeks to perpetuate its power and to implement a social transformation that creates a new reality fitting the "new world order" it projects into the near future. While the central transmitters of this discourse are skillful politicians seeking to fabricate a charismatic type of legitimacy, these tropes are also the projections of certain intellectual subcultures that seek to realize their wish for cultural-institutional hegemony by opting for a symbolic-political discourse of fundamental renewal in which a new hierarchy will put an end to the period of liminality characterizing the transition.

Of course, as shown by the rise and fall of many politicians in the region and beyond in the last two decades, the intention to build a new system should not be confused with the actual creation of a lasting and sustainable

framework. In every personalized political regime there are many unpredictable factors and occurrences which might completely reshuffle the power balance. Nevertheless, in my opinion is mistaken to see ideological developments in Hungary as a combination of cynical populism that serves mobilization but does not really reflect institutional practices, or as a set of individual “violations” of the European legal norms. One should take the avowed intentions of the Hungarian government seriously in the sense that it is indeed the government of the “System of National Cooperation”. This system entails a certain view on the past and the future and a set of socio-economic and anthropological insights about the human being as being embedded in “warm” biopolitical communities (family and ethnic nation) and in need of a certain hierarchy to organize his/her life. Its socio-economic vision is rooted in the rejection of the market as a legitimate regulator of economic behavior, a task it delegates to the state bureaucracy. In this framework, curbing the influence of trade unions and limiting the legal provisions that protect employees (which could be seen as typical neo-liberal measures) combines with economic protectionism and a penchant for corporatism, via the establishment of various chambers representing different branches of the economy and the state sector with compulsory membership and strong ideological control.

Last but not least, the system also entails a peculiar understanding of democracy – not in the sense of popular participation in government by means of representative institutions, nor in the sense of envisioning a possible change of government as a result of popular vote, but in the tradition of the nineteenth-century Eastern European variation on the theme of the *volonté générale, conceived as an emanation of the national spirit, embodied in the charismatic national awakeners who represent the “true self” of the nation and who understand the true interests of the nation better than individual citizens.*

All these elements are deeply rooted in the local political culture, carrying as it does the trauma of dependence on external imperial structures and “great powers”, and are shaped by the experience of three long-lasting paternalistic-autocratic regimes over the last 160 years, in contrast to the volatile democratic periods of 1848-49, 1918, 1945-47 and the post-1989 decades. Francis Joseph, Horthy and Kádár all established their rule with terror and all became “fathers of the nation”, playing a key role in perpetuating the imperial dependence of Hungary but at the same time conferring the illusion of relative independence. This is evident in the curious duality of political communication, which both raises the eventual possibility of exiting the “oppressive” European Union but at the same time seeking to lobby as much as possible from the structural funds of EU, which is legitimized by a discourse stressing that it is not Hungary that has abandoned European norms but rather that it is the European Union that has betrayed the “real” European values.

In this sense, the most important point of divergence from the previous instances of authoritarian regimes is doubtlessly the current international context; despite all the crisis talk surrounding it, the EU is still a framework eminently capable of defending certain elements of liberal democracy in Hungary. Of course, this is not entirely unambiguous, since ultimately it requires going beyond a merely economic and legalistic understanding of the task of European institutions and acting according to a moral imperative posited “behind” these institutions. The Hungarian situation also poses questions about the limits of pro forma democratic sovereignty, the relationship between an ethnic and a civic understanding of the nation, as well as the acceptability of the manifest economic protectionism of member states in the shadow of the global economic crisis. And finally it raises the problem of the sustainability of the model that shaped the political life of Western Europe after WWII, one based on self-limiting political and ideological struggle. Seen from this perspective, the way the European Union handles the Hungarian issue has a significance that reaches well beyond the individual case of a minor East Central European state and might become a powerful indicator of the direction European political culture will take in the decades to come.

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[1] The present text draws on parts of the essay, "Beyond Liminality? The *Kulturkampf* of the early 2000s in East Central Europe," to be published in the forthcoming special issue of *boundary2* (Duke University) on Eastern Europe. I would like to thank the editors of *boundary2* for agreeing to my use of these excerpts.