

Hungary: the Fidesz Project

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Fidesz successfully reconstructed the centre-right around its core ideas of conservatism and Christian Democracy, solidarity, family, nationhood and statehood

It is hard to find a political cleavage line as deep as the one that divides left from right as the one in Hungary. It has all the qualities of an ethnic polarisation, in the context of which each side attributes the worst to the other and, consequently, there is no dialogue between the two sides. At the deepest level, the divide is ontological, about what constitutes good and evil, what is the meaning of democracy, what is owed by members of society to one another. It is impossible to understand the dynamics of Hungarian politics without recognising that it is a politically segmented society. The polarisation is so far reaching that it can fairly be said to add up to a cold civil war. At the time of writing, the chances of a grand historic compromise look impossible, except that politics is the art of the possible, so the option should not be excluded entirely. It is worth noting here that a sizeable section of Hungarian society has become entirely disillusioned with politics; this creates a possibility for both left and right to mobilise once and future supporters by deploying an effective communications strategy.

The cleavage has well-established historical origins with its roots in the pre-First World War era when historic Hungary had taken major steps towards defining a national model of moder-

nity, even if this model was very partial and was quite incapable of solving the problem of the peasantry, of the non-Magyar minorities or of developing something like a modern concept of citizenship (cf. republicanism in France after 1871). The failed revolutions of 1918–1919, Trianon and the loss of empire shattered the pre-1914 model of modernity and saddled Hungary with a minimally updated k.u.k model of elite rule. This model was stable to stagnant and was definitively destroyed by the Second World War. There were stumbling attempts to relaunch the quest for a Hungarian modernity after the war, but these were quashed by the communist takeover; and much the same happened to the incipient model of modernity embodied in the 1956 revolution (which was a revolution, despite the widespread preference for calling it an uprising, see Heller). The post-1956 system was sustained by far-reaching coercion and the threat of coercion, but did accept some limits to power thanks to the memory of the failed revolution, which had, after all, scattered the Stalinist nomenklatura to the four winds in a matter of days.

What the Kádárist regime did was to entrench the power of the nomenklatura and to promote a kind of weak two-way relationship based on consumerism. But the relationship was always

one of dependence by the many on the few and instead of overseeing the transformation of the traditional peasantry into modern citizenship, it kept the bulk of the population in a status of tutelage. In some ways, Kádárism was an ironic reprise of the interwar system, in which a narrowly based, traditionally legitimated elite (in the Weberian sense) blocked the emergence of a modern civic-minded society.

Kádárism did much the same, except that it was legitimated by reference to an increasingly unsustainable ideology, by the power of the Soviet Union as the ultimate guarantor of communism, by Kádár's personality and by consumerism. When these failed, the system failed. And the failure took place in slow motion, which allowed the nomenklatura to regroup, preempt the chances of a revolution in 1989 (cf. Czechoslovakia or Estonia) and to entrench as much of its power as it could in the brave new world of electoral democracy, but without creating anything resembling an all-encompassing democratic infrastructure. It was with these antecedent processes that the Republic of Hungary was launched in 1989–1990. Perhaps nothing shows the extent and depth of the carry-over from the previous system, the absence of anything resembling a caesura, as the decision to amend the 1949 Stalinist Constitution rather than write a new one.

It was an inauspicious start to democracy that was made worse by the lack of skills of the first democratically elected government under the prime minister, József Antall, and the success of the salvaging activity of the nomenklatura. The next crucial step was the recognition that the technocrats of the communist era, the democratic opposition and many of the heirs of the nomenklatura had a good deal in common, above all, maybe, their conviction that they and they alone had the right to rule the country. The 1990 election result, which produced a centre-right majority, was—on this view—not just an aberration, but flouted the will of history—the communist years had left many with the belief that somehow or

other history was, really, truly, law-governed after all; and it was on their side.

The Rise of the Liberal Consensus

The next step was the rise of the liberal consensus in the 1990s (Mouffe). The post-communist left in Hungary was looking for a home that reached beyond Hungarian society, which could assure it a support base, because the left always knew that its domestic support was insecure. It could win elections if a centre-right government had failed *and* (not *or*) if it was capable of mounting a convincing communications strategy, relying on the confusion of the relatively unsophisticated Hungarian voter. The semantic and cognitive skills of the latter were improving slowly, thanks to the change of generations and to experience, but were certainly low in the 1990s. Hence support from abroad became crucial to sustain the left's legitimacy and its self-legitimation by the 2000s.

The encounter with the liberal consensus was, thus, a fruitful one, at any rate in the short term in giving meaning to a leftwing identity in the aftermath of the collapse of communism. But it had its downside in the longer term—it made it possible for the post-communist left to evade having to redefine its identity, not to ask questions about what being leftwing meant in a democratic system in which it was competing with other currents and to reflect on its responsibility for the communist years.

This absence of a redefinition, thanks to the international context, had the consequence that the Hungarian left, aided and abetted by the remnants of the communist nomenklatura, inherited a great deal from the one party system intellectually and culturally, in terms of values and attitudes, as well as physically (in the form of property, networks, money). Crucially, it saw itself as a hegemonic elite endowed with a transcendental mission to transform Hungarian society according to its vision of modernity, a vision that was defined overwhelmingly by the leftwing elite's

understanding of what the West was and wanted.

Inevitably, given that this was an instrumental endeavour, the West so constructed was narrowly defined by the uses to which the elite in question wanted to put it; in effect what we are looking at is an “imagined West” (in Anderson’s language). And predictably it had less and less to do with actual Hungarian realities, whether in sociological terms (stratification, income distribution, poverty, gender roles, urban-rural cleavages, population movements etc) or in the light of the aspirations of Hungarian society, which while in no way post-material did include non-material elements, like the meanings and security of a collective identity.

What is striking about this elite, which continues to dominate Budapest cultural life, though this is less true of the provinces (which this elite rather despises anyway), is that it failed (and still fails) to recognise that it has become a comprador elite. It has functioned in such a way as to inhibit cultural creativity by its feigned or real indifference to innovation, to the great diversity of the West, to the significance of globalisation (like Black Swans, cf. Taleb) and, maybe most importantly, that in a democracy the role of the intellectual has changed irreversibly from its role as moral legislator to interpreter (Bauman). The left-liberal elite in Hungary performs none of these roles or only very marginally so at best.

One of the politically significant features of the Hungarian left has been its propensity to corruption. The 2002–2010 governments were widely recognised as having come close to establishing a rentier system, in which the resource was not a raw material, like oil or natural gas, but taxpayers’ money and whatever moneys could be siphoned off from EU cohesion and structural funds.

This is the cultural and political context of the last two decades. It is against this background that the leftwing and centre-right governments of the 2002–2012 governments should be assessed. Fidesz successfully reconstructed the centre-right around its core ideas of conservatism and Christian Democracy, solidarity, family, nationhood

and statehood, with the underlying imperative of (finally) establishing a model of modernity that was in tune with historically inherited traditions, social aspirations and democracy (Oltay). It is crucial to understand that Fidesz has always had a clear commitment to Europe, but that this did not mean invariably accepting what the European Commission decided.

Neo-conservatives vs. Neo-nomenklatura

The task of the centre-right was always going to be a hard one in the aftermath of communism. What, after all, did it mean that one was a conservative when the relevant past to be conserved was the communist one from which the conservatives sought to distance themselves? Likewise, how could one (re)define Christian Democracy when a sizeable section of society was secular and had rather negative associations with organised religion, seeing that the churches had been heavily penetrated by the communists? In a very real sense, post-communist conservatism had to be radical in order to re-establish itself as conservative—a paradox that haunted the 1990–1994 government. Fidesz regrouped the right around a set of values that were not so strongly past-orientated, that took on the agenda of modernity derived from Hungarian resources and which understood that it could be radical towards the neo-nomenklatura and retain its centre-right credentials. In one important respect Fidesz was helped by the left. The espousal of neo-liberal market fundamentalism by the left allowed Fidesz to proclaim the importance of the state as an instrument of solidarity, redistribution and security.

The left, given the polarisation, contested each and every one of these values and did so vociferously, all too often gravely distorting what the Fidesz government was actually seeking to achieve. It is not unfair to suggest that the left’s concept of opposition was to aim at the destruction of the centre-right, to delegitimize it completely and somehow to secure a polit-

ical hegemony for itself to parallel the cultural hegemony that it believes that it already enjoys. It follows logically that in this belief system, the left can have no theory of a democratic centre-right and, likewise explains the widely propagated assertion that the centre-right was much the same as the far-right.

By 2010, the economic mismanagement by the Gyurcsány and Bajnai governments had brought the country into a parlous situation. Not only had Hungary become heavily indebted, but the machinery of the state was in complete disarray—it barely functioned. So, for example, the police had been very largely withdrawn from rural areas, thereby providing the space for far-right vigilante activity. The taxation system had become wholly haphazard as a result of the constant changes introduced by the government in a vain attempt to shore up its finances, and tax morale hit new lows. Bajnai's austerity package brought new strata closer to the poverty line and created fertile ground for far-right agitation. The unresolved Roma issue added to this, especially in the north-east Hungarian rust-belt. Outmigration was on the increase, notably in the medical profession. EU membership facilitated this. In effect, whoever had won the 2010 elections would have had to introduce major and deep-seated reforms.

Fidesz won a two-thirds majority, and Viktor Orbán, the prime minister, interpreted this as a mandate for a radical transformation and proceeded to act along these lines. These reforms should have been introduced after the regime shift of 1989, but were neglected by the left because it would have been to their disadvantage; the Antall government lacked the capacity to launch anything far-reaching; and the 1998–2002 Fidesz-led government only began the reforms but was unable to complete them.

Fidesz's task in 2010 was a major one. In effect, what had come into being after the collapse of communism was a Hungarian version of the "deep state", the Turkish *derin devlet*, in which the state

administration may be competent and skilled technically, but what it administers is not what the (elected) government instructs it to do. So from the outside, what one sees looks like a Weberian legal-rational bureaucracy, but the reality lies elsewhere. The public servants are serving not the public, but their political masters from whom they expect protection, advancement, status and access to state funds for private purposes. Note that the state machinery includes the administration of justice.

A version of this deep state was constructed by the nomenklatura before and above all after 1989. The colour of the government could change, but that did not mean that a politically independent public function would come into being. And as the years passed, new entrants were rapidly socialised into the norms of the deep state or they were excluded or were silenced if they remained inside (Hirschman).

To that may be added the two central problems of any modern state administration, its size and its autonomy over society. Weber's thinking was informed by his analysis of a relatively small bureaucracy, but the modern state is much larger and has a critical mass that makes it all but impossible for political supervision to function effectively (Mann, Nordinger). This state of affairs enhances the ability of any bureaucracy to establish tacit targets of its own, its own survival being the most important, that may be at odds with both the political strategy of the government and the *bonum publicum*. If we add the nomenklatura element to this mix, we can see that the Fidesz project had a formidable task if it wanted to implement its radical reform programme. It would have to create an entirely new state apparatus. Predictably this generated resentment and resistance on the part of those affected.

Hungarian solution to Hungarian problems

In brief, in 2010, a broad front transformation strategy was elaborated by the new government. Its economic strategy, however, was less

than successful. In sum, it was a growth strategy based on the assumption that by 2012 the European and global economy would have recovered sufficiently to pull Hungary along with it; this turned out to be a misjudgement and that, in turn, was further exacerbated by the unexpected harshness with which the Commission treated the Hungarian deficit, threatening to cut cohesion funds (this did not happen in the end, but caused resentment especially as Spain was handled with kid gloves), only to accept grudgingly that the deficit would be within the required three percent for 2013.

Government debt was still high, but was brought down from somewhere over 90 percent to below 80 percent—still high, but heading in the direction of manageability. It was a central tenet of Orbán's that austerity should fall not on the shoulders of the consumer, but the service sector and the multinationals. This was very unpopular in many circles, predictably. Other reforms targeted the tax system, secondary and higher education, the governance of religious establishments, small and medium-sized enterprises, the justice system, local government and the public administration. The last sought to breathe new life into the top-heavy, complex and frequently user-hostile bureaucracy which was all too often a drag on entrepreneurialism, as well as being a seed-bed of corruption.

Probably the two most controversial changes were the new Basic Law and the media law. They both attracted the most extreme and most ill-founded criticism. Two examples. It was widely claimed that the new Constitution banned abortion; it did not. Equally, it was claimed that by changing the name of the country to "Hungary" from the "Republic of Hungary", the new Constitution had thereby changed the form of the state; line three of the Constitution reads, "the Hungarian state is a republic". There were countless other instances of ignorance and deliberate misinterpretation, aided and abetted by the opposition which had excellent connections with the international

media. The Constitutional Court, which had been supposedly emasculated, repeatedly declared laws unconstitutional, thereby demonstrating that the checks and balances of the system were working adequately.

It was as if domestic and international commentators were vying among themselves as to who could dream up the most extreme instances of these purported attacks by the Orbán government on democracy. The German-language press went furthest in this campaign. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in its edition of the 1 May 2010, that is, just a few days after Fidesz's electoral victory, but before it actually announced any policies, declared that Hungary had a Fascist government.

This demands an explanation. In brief, the Fidesz government offended against the sacralised canons of the left-liberal consensus in several ways. First, its two-thirds majority was an intolerable affront to those who believed that history had ended in the victory of liberal democracy (as they understood it). Second, Fidesz's reform programme directly contradicted conventional thinking and thereby threatened to revitalise the opposition to the liberal consensus from the right, something that the consensus believed was already on the scrapheap of history. Thirdly, there were the generally leftwing presuppositions and assumption-sets of the bulk of the media, who were predictably predisposed to believe the worst reading of whatever the Fidesz government did. Fourth was and is Central Europe's discursive deficit, that whatever was said in Hungarian (Czech, Polish, Estonian etc.) carried much less weight than English or French. Fifth, the insights of postcolonial theory tell us that power relations within Europe are uneven and that large polities, especially those with a colonial past, have a tendency to insist that only their way is correct and that smaller states are deviant when they behave differently. Finally, there is the half-explicit universalist ideology of the liberal consensus, that there is a single humanity and in so far as there isn't, there

should be one—the slide from the descriptive to the prescriptive is so slick as to escape the eye. In effect, the consensus does not accept its own contingency, implicitly denies that it too is a product of history and believes that its values cannot be challenged by a state that is in Europe and is a member of the European Union. Fidesz, by rejecting this universalism and insisting on a specifically Hungarian solution to Hungarian problems, was guilty of the unpardonable sin of going against the laws of history.

The Fidesz reform programme is far from over. Whatever its fate, the challenges to it at home and abroad have nothing to do with constructive criticism, but are aimed at burying it, at treating it as dangerous anomaly and making the world safe

for the consensus. Bauman's moral legislation lives on. Hungary under Fidesz is a constant challenge to this project, hence the unremitting campaign to eliminate it.



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