

# **Ideas for Institution-Building in Hungary: The Roundtable Talks of 1989.**

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In this paper, I will analyze the meaning of these revolutionary changes of 1989 by focusing on the nature of the Roundtable talks. First, these negotiations will briefly be discussed theoretically and comparatively. Secondly, I will focus on the main elements of their visions of a future democracy in Europe, and also their historical references by which they could distance some points in the past while revitalizing others. The paper will conclude with an evaluation of the effects of the roundtable type of transitions as historic breakthroughs.

The beginning of the end of the old regime had to start with the process „unmasking” it, since the system was ideologically based on promises of enlightenment which contradicted to its everyday political practice. Everybody was aware of this discrepancy and knew that it was a lie in the light of dictatorial policies. The leaders of the regime argued that history is uni-linear process of progress and one day ideal socialism (communism) is going to be realized. All present miseries of the „actually existing socialism” were just downplayed as „mistakes” which were made „on the road” to a perfect society.

The ideological break became available only when dissidents in East Central Europe were able to step out from the Marxist framework of criticism. This intellectual turn occurred in the 1970s only when opponents to the regime stopped talking about the reformability of the system and started to refer to concepts like human rights and civil society. These two concepts proved to be the most powerful ideological tool in their resistance to late socialism.<sup>1</sup> It was only when they started to organize civil society outside the framework of the official society that they became prepared to create a different social entity to be represented in future negotiations against the leaders of the regime.

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<sup>1</sup> On those, see Andrew Arato: *From Neo-Marxism to Democratic Theory: Essays in the Critical Theory of Soviet-type Societies*. Armonk, N. Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1993.

First, they had to realize that they were living in an organized system of lie and had to have a need to live within the truth<sup>2</sup>. Second, they had to organize themselves outside the institutionalized regime of lie. Third, they had to be able to present themselves as representatives of the majority of people who wanted a break with the regime of lies. While presenting themselves as a different body of people (the society) against the communists (the regime), they made clearly visible the dividing line between „us” and „them”. Therefore, at the end, by „unmasking the hypocrisy” they had to present a democratic alternative to participate in the negotiations and to compete successfully in electoral politics.

Democratic transitions, as they occurred in Central Europe,<sup>3</sup> are some ways different from classic revolutions. They are, indeed, revolutionary in their outcome but non-revolutionary in their process of change.

- First, while revolutions start out from below and outside the power centre, transitions are more complex interplays between elites and non-elites. One peculiarity of transitions is that they start from inside and outside, and also from top and bottom at the same time.
- Second, while revolutions are mostly violent or threatening with the use of violence, transitions are non-violent changes in which participants consciously pay attention to avoid violence.
- Third, while revolutions usually polarize society between supporters of the old and new regimes, transitions offer place for different type of participants. In transition processes usually both the outgoing authoritarian bloc (reformers vs hard-liners) and the incoming opposition bloc (moderates vs radicals) are divided.
- Fourth, while revolutions are based on the mobilization of society (or seek to mobilize it at least), during the period of transition one can observe both mobilization and demobilization processes.
- Fifth, with regard to the composition of elites, while revolutions usually bring about elite change, transitions rather mean a fluid restructuring of elites instead of their complete replacement.<sup>4</sup>

All of these differences make difficult for many people to see democratic transitions as processes of a historic break. Quite characteristically, many people became dissatisfied with the results of the transition and claimed to make a „second” transition in order to „complete” the revolutionary change. At the same time, people clearly distinguished between two different types of regimes: one which existed before 1989 and the other one which started to exist from 1989 onwards.

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<sup>2</sup> See Václav Havel: *Living in Truth*. London: Faber & Faber, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> By Central Europe, here I refer to four countries in transition during 1989-90: Poland, Hungary, the GDR, and Czechoslovakia.

<sup>4</sup> On these differences see in detail: András Bozóki: “The Hungarian Transition in Comparative Perspective” in András Bozóki, András Körösi & George Schöpflin (eds.): *Post-Communist Transition: Emerging Pluralism in Hungary*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992. 163-191.

People do not speak about revolution, but they clearly see the differences between "before" and "after".<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, revolutions and transitions are similar in their result. If revolutions or transitions succeed the regime changes. Although, analytically, transitions can be placed between reforms and revolutions, in fact, they are closer to the revolutionary forms of change. In its style and processes, a transition is more similar to reforms, in while regarding its results, it gets closer to the notion of revolution. While reformers want to save the existing regime, transformers want to transcend or replace it. If a reform is successful the regime does not change, if a transition proves to be successful, the regime does change.

Reforms and revolutions can, however, be separated for analytical purposes only. In reality, historical processes are complex as they are, they might stem from each other, they might mutually reinforce each other. Revolutionary situations might open up the regime for reforms or vice versa.<sup>6</sup> Reforms can make up the first, preparatory phase of a revolution. Failed reforms might lead to revolutions, failed revolutions might lead to reforms. Opposition strategies for a democratic transition are themselves based on experiences from previous historical processes and events.

### **Poland and Hungary: Some comparisons**

Among the East Central European political transformations, it was Poland where the transition to democracy came first, therefore the Polish opposition had to behave in the most cautious manner. Accordingly, the Polish Roundtable Talks were not so much about paving the way to a full democracy, as about agreeing, first, on the legalization of Solidarity, and second, on holding semi-democratic, partially fixed elections.<sup>7</sup> The Polish elections of June 1989 could not yet be regarded as fully democratic ones.

Historically, however, we must recognize that the Polish negotiations began as far back as August of 1980. Polish dissidents were the pioneers in initiating open negotiations with the communists in the region.<sup>8</sup> The first talks between the activists of the newly formed Solidarity and the leaders of the communist party in the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk marked the beginning of the end. The self-limiting revolution of Solidarity in 1980-81 established a model for other opposition groups in East Central Europe.

Before Solidarity, people in East Central Europe had two major attempts of different type to change communist rule: a *revolution* (in 1956 in Hungary) and a *reform* (in 1968 in

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Peter Wagner who drew my attention to this point.

<sup>6</sup> On the notion of "revolutionary situation" see in detail: Charles Tilly: *From Mobilization to Revolution*. New York: Random House, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> On the Polish negotiations see: Wiktor Osyatinski: "The Roundtable Talks in Poland" in Jon Elster (ed.): *Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. 21-68.

<sup>8</sup> See Neal Ascherson: *The Polish August: The Self-Limiting Revolution*. New York: Viking, 1983.; Jadwiga Staniszkis: *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Czechoslovakia). Although both of these changes proved to be internally successful, they both provoked Soviet military intervention and were not able to resist the external military powers. Any sort of resistance (intra-party or extra-party, violent or peaceful) seemed to be hopeless. The solution for this deadlock came with the idea of „new evolutionism” which was a strategy based on non-violent non-cooperation with the oppressive party-state and the revitalization of civil society.<sup>9</sup> This strategy aimed to strengthen civil society to make it prepared for future negotiations on rights and freedoms. It was an intellectual break with the hypocrisy of reforms and preparation for real, meaningful talks. By refusing reforms and shallow negotiations, Solidarity was able to create a political vacuum around the communist party. It was able to make clear that there was no other solution for the crisis than entering negotiations with the Solidarity.

For Poland, 1989 was the closing chapter of a long historical process: their decade-long transition from „ideocratic” communism to an authoritarian, military regime and then, finally, to democracy. Strictly speaking, what the Poles accomplished between February and April 1989 was simply to close an era of military dictatorship.<sup>10</sup> Their first task was to restore legality and grant legitimacy to Solidarity, a task initiated not by the opposition, but by the governing bloc after the failure of the 1988 referendum. By late 1988, even the communists had come to realize that there was no other option for them.

While the task of the Polish and Hungarian Roundtable talks was to extricate their countries from dictatorship, the German and Czechoslovakian Roundtable talks occurred only *after* their revolutions. Therefore, in the latter cases, the goal of their negotiations was the establishment of the institutional order of the new regime, since they had already disengaged themselves from their dictatorial regimes. Poland was the first, but ended up with semi-free elections in 1989. As the second to attempt a transformation, the intention of the Hungarian negotiators was to follow the Polish path but to go further and achieve more than the Poles did.

Only in the case of Hungary did the Roundtable talks have to achieve both goals simultaneously: extricating Hungary from the old regime, and creating the institutional order of a democratic regime.<sup>11</sup> It represents not only an end of an era but the beginning of a new one.

The Hungarian negotiators often referred openly to the Polish precedents.<sup>12</sup> They argued that the Polish opposition could arrive at a compromise with the communists on semi-free elections

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<sup>9</sup> See Adam Michnik: “A New Evolutionism” in A. Michnik: *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> On the Jaruzelski regime, see: Anton Pelinka: *Politics of the Lesser Evil: Leadership, Democracy, and Jaruzelski's Poland*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> For the minutes of the negotiations see: András Bozóki (editor-in-chief), Márta Elbert, Melinda Kalmár, Béla Révész, Erzsébet Ripp & Zoltán Ripp (editors): *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve: kerekasztal-tárgyalások 1989-ben. /The Script of the Regime Change: Round Table Talks in 1989/* 1-4 Volumes, Budapest: Magvető, 1999.; András Bozóki et al (eds.) 5-8. Volumes, Budapest: Új Mandátum, 1999-2000. (From now on: *ARF*); On the historical context of the Hungarian negotiations see Rudolf L. Tóké: *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996., and András Bozóki (ed.): *Alkotmányos forradalom. /Constitutional Revolution/ ARF*, Vol. 7. Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Both the communists and the opposition, independently from each other, sent delegates to Poland in May 1989 to learn the first hand experiences of the Polish negotiators.

because they were much stronger than the Hungarian opposition. The Polish opposition could afford to accept substantial compromises in the early stages, because they were strong enough to mobilize the masses on the streets and change the results of the Roundtable talks later on.<sup>13</sup> According to this argument, the Polish dissidents could accept a compromise without damaging their political credibility.

The Hungarian National Roundtable negotiations benefited, in many respects, from coming after the Polish elections; it was considerably easier to run second than to be the path-breakers. As it happened, the negotiations also fell in the period of time between two significant historic events: between the suppression of the student demonstration at Tienanmen Square in China (June 1989) and the formation of the first non-communist government in Poland in four decades (September 1989). Between June and September of that year -- between the Polish elections in early June and the beginning of Leipzig's Monday demonstrations in mid-September -- Hungary alone was on the road to democratization.

The Hungarian negotiations had three groups of participants:

1. the communist party: Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party (*Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, MSZMP)
2. the Opposition Roundtable (nine organizations) and
3. the so-called Third Side, comprised of communist party satellite organizations invited by the MSZMP (seven organizations).

Against the recommendations of reformist circles, the Opposition Roundtable refused to negotiate with the incumbent cabinet, and insisted on bilateral talks with the communist party alone. The opposition thus wished to draw a symbolic line between "us" and "them". Had the regime change already occurred, the opposition could have negotiated the policy issues with the cabinet. But in early summer 1989, this was not yet the case. The Constitution still in force declared that "the leading force of our society is the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party". Given that situation, the opposition had to negotiate with the Party as the real arbiter of power. The cabinet was not against the transition; it was the Party, which embodied the old regime and constituted the main obstacle to a change of regimes. In exchange for negotiating directly with the Party, the Opposition Roundtable agreed, as a compromise, to the participation of some of the Party's satellite organizations in the talks, thereby making the negotiations trilateral.

In formal terms, the negotiations were designed to take place at three levels (expert committees, middle-level sessions and plenary sessions) between the three negotiating parties, with the participation of 16 organizations, represented by a total of 573 individuals. During the three summer months of 1989, Hungary truly succeeded in capturing the attention of the world press. During that summer, the democratization process in Hungary was not yet accomplished; it was only in the making. Although the negotiators were divided along their tactical and strategic considerations, and some of them were "ultra-moderate" indeed, they did not need to compromise on the *outcome* of the talks, only on *the manner* of transition.

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<sup>13</sup> This was a characteristic argument of Viktor Orbán (Fidesz) in 1989, which was accepted by other radicals in the opposition bloc.

Among the members of the Opposition Roundtable some political parties (specifically the ultra-moderates) were ready to offer strategic concessions, but they were kept under the control of those parties whose differences were in tactical rather than strategic in nature. The moderates successfully controlled the ultra-moderates by entering into tactical compromises, while the radicals were playing the game by following self-limiting political behavior and urging the moderates to limit their tactical concessions. This delicate balance of internal conflicts characterized the Opposition Roundtable, which, despite its internal fragility, nonetheless managed to hold together until the agreement of September 1989 was concluded.

Social-political transitions are generally depicted in the scholarly literature as elite games.<sup>14</sup> True, it is hard to create a democracy without the existence of an elite/counter-elite discourse, in which both are willing to commit themselves to negotiating frames for a democratic process. Since the works of Schumpeter it has become commonly accepted that elite and democracy are not incompatible concepts; that both are important in social change.<sup>15</sup> We would not subscribe to a view of the Hungarian transition as merely a game of elite-groups. It was an elite-driven process, to be sure, but not solely an elitist exchange; there was considerable interplay between the masses and the elite; with elite and non-elite linkages observable on many different occasions.<sup>16</sup> On March 15, 1989, for instance, there was a massive demonstration in Budapest, with speakers openly calling for greater unity in the opposition, because they recognized the danger that the Communist party might divide the opposition, and negotiate with the fractions one by one.<sup>17</sup> On May 1, another demonstration, organized by independent trade unions in a Budapest park, drew tens of thousands. And, of course, the June 16, 1989 reburial of former Prime Minister Imre Nagy and his fellow-martyrs from the 1956 revolution, attended by roughly 250,000 people, also demonstrated strong popular support.<sup>18</sup>

The Hungarian negotiators could feel the support of ordinary men and women even after the agreement of September 18, 1989, when some parties from the Opposition Round Table launched a petition campaign for a referendum to resolve the remaining issues of the talks by popular decision. In a matter of three weeks, they were able to collect more than 200,000 signatures on the streets. It is safe to say that the negotiated revolution in Hungary went well beyond the business of small, well-organized elite groups. They had the support of large masses, which was borne out by their successes in the first free elections in 1990, as well.

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance: Samuel P. Huntington: *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.; Richard Gunther, P. Nikiforos Diamanourous & Hans-Jürgen Puhle: *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Southern Europe*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Schumpeter: *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1942.

<sup>16</sup> On this, see in detail: Alan Renwick: "Eliten kívüli erők szerepe a rendszerváltásban" in András Bozóki (ed.): *Alkotmányos forradalom /Constitutional Revolution/, ARF, Vol. 7*. Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2000. 659-678.

<sup>17</sup> On this, see: Tamás Hofer: "Rendszerváltás szimbolikus mezőben: 1989 március 15-e Budapesten" /Regime Change on Symbolic Field/ *Politikatudományi Szemle, Vol. 1., No. 1., 1992*.

<sup>18</sup> János Rainer M.: "A rendszerváltás és az ötvenhatos hagyomány" /Regime Change and the Tradition of 1956/ In: András Bozóki (ed.): *Alkotmányos forradalom. /Constitutional Revolution/ ARF, Vol. 7., Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2000. 651-658*.

Both in Poland and Hungary international factors also played a role in the success of the negotiations: Most notably, the visit of U.S. President George Bush, and the support of the Soviet chief party secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev.<sup>19</sup> Internal pressures from the population and external support from the Western democratic community were both important. In Hungary, the by-elections in late-July confirmed that the opposition had gained strength. In Poland, the results of the June 4, 1989 semi-free elections had far-reaching consequences which forced the former communist satellite parties to distance themselves from the communist party and to help making a new majority in the parliament with the Solidarity. It is true that, neither in Poland nor in Hungary, none of the negotiating partners' positions were legitimized by democratic election. In a way, democracy was created by non-democratic ways. Still, the emerging political society clearly supported the opposition-groups' struggle for democracy.

### **Designing a Democratic Regime: Political Values and Visions**

Of the most salient political values of 1989, I will discuss here the following: (negative) freedom, popular sovereignty, representative government, non-violence, consensual democracy, civil society, and the minimization of conflicts. The prevailing vision of the framers of the new democracy was that of a democratic welfare society which would "return to Europe," combining the features of a market economy, representative government and international military neutrality.

#### *1. Negative freedom*

Among the political values espoused by the participants of the round table talks the idea of *freedom* was primary, understood both as a liberal and a democratic value. Freedom as a liberal value meant that people could finally exercise their human rights and civil liberties. They were free to talk to one another openly, both in private and in public; there would be a free press, and the right of association and party formation would be guaranteed as inalienable rights of all citizens.

Freedom was understood in a negative rather than a positive sense,<sup>20</sup> requiring the state (the Party, the police, the military, etc., the government as a whole) to allow individuals to pursue their activities free of harassment, interference or control. It was freedom *from* something, freedom from the intervention of the state. This was clearly the cumulative outcome of two major political influences. First, the legacy of dissent in East Central Europe, which valued high human

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<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Gorbachev and Bush did not urge the Hungarians to speed up the tempo of the transition. They rather warned them that the process of democratization should be kept controlled and the direction of the changes is more important than their speed. It seems that Hungarian negotiators were more impatient and more eager to speed up the process of change than the pro-democratic politicians both in East and West. See in detail: Csaba Békés: "Vissza Európába: A magyarországi rendszerváltás nemzetközi háttere" /Back to Europe: The International Context of the Hungarian Regime Change/ in András Bozóki (ed.): *Alkotmányos forradalom. /Constitutional Revolution/ ARF*, Vol. 7. Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2000. 792-825.

<sup>20</sup> On these conceptual differences see in detail: Isaiah Berlin: "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Michael Sandel (ed.): *Liberalism and Its Critics*. New York: New York University Press, 1984. 15-36.

rights and equal human dignity (as expressed in the writings of Václav Benda, István Bibó, Václav Havel, György Konrád, Milan Kundera, Jacek Kuron, Adam Michnik, Jan Patočka, and others). Secondly, the impact of the then dominant Western neo-liberal, neo-conservative ideologies represented by theorists such as Friedrich A. Hayek and Milton Friedman, and politicians such as Thatcher and Reagan.

## 2. *Popular sovereignty*

The democratic conception of freedom was understood as *popular sovereignty*, reclaimed after so many decades of Soviet domination, when the presence of Soviet advisors and the Red Army determined political outcomes. The idea of popular sovereignty begs for the definition of political community. When the boundaries of political community (and therefore the identity of the democratic state) were questionable newborn democracy was often distorted by ethnically defined nationalist or nationalizing policies. In many ways, nationalism and democracy are not far from each other: they both based themselves on popular will.<sup>21</sup> Where the borders of the state had been clearly defined and the anti-Communist civic movements clearly demonstrated their commitment to democracy the end of communism meant to be a beginning of a regime based on democratic citizenship. All of the countries with round table type of transition belong to this category.

Where, however, these social conditions had not existed, especially in the case of non-democratic federations, popular will was used and abused by leaders who transformed themselves from communist to nationalist politicians to maintain power. In these countries democracy was diminishing to the level of partly free and non-fair elections.<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising that none of these countries were able to produce a negotiated way-out from the dictatorship.

## 3. *Representative government*

It is worthy of note that democracy was understood as a *representative* form of governance, wherein people exercise their constitutional powers not so much directly, as through the activity of their elected representatives. If democracy, as Robert A. Dahl and others have said,<sup>23</sup> has three major components -- competition, participation and civil liberties -- it is significant that Hungarians emphasized the first and the third components, and tended to ignore the second. Because communism had based itself on the forced, involuntary participation of the masses, people grew distrustful of the value of political mobilization initiated at the top. They came to prefer a liberal, "non-participatory" democracy. This tendency correlates with the high value of individual freedom understood mainly as „negative” freedom.

## 4. *Non-violence*

One reason the Hungarian regime change was effected so smoothly, was the participants' insistence on peaceful means. *Non-violence* was highly valued and taken seriously by all sides.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Elie Kedourie: *Nationalism*. London: Hutchinson, 1985.

<sup>22</sup> See: Staffan Darnolf & Yonhok Choe: "Free and Fair Elections: What Do We Mean and How Can We Measure Them?" A paper presented at the 17<sup>th</sup> IPSA World Congress, Seoul, South Korea, August 18-21, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Robert A. Dahl: *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

One could venture to say that non-violence was as highly prized as freedom. The participants' commitment to non-violence, their genuine desire to reach consensus through negotiations, is one of the legacies of 1989.<sup>24</sup> Ordinary people had no wish to repeat the revolution of 1956, and their behavior was also influenced by the evolutionist strategy of the opposition. The communists, still in power, also wished to come through the crisis without resorting to violence. Each side was anxiously anticipating the need to respond to the violence of the other. Fortunately for all, no one initiated hostilities.

Non-violent conflict resolution was ensured by the then still living legacy of *self-limiting* political actions. Even the so-called radical opposition was, in fact, quite moderate by comparison with other radical democratic opposition formations in other transitions to democracy, especially in Latin America. This ideal of moderation was the result of the decade-long co-operation of the democratic opposition groups of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. (The high moral value placed on non-violence among political ideals was recently discussed and re-evaluated again, in connection with the NATO air strikes in Yugoslavia. In the spring of 1999, Hungarian public opinion was seriously split over the NATO intervention following the crisis in Kosovo. One camp felt that the intervention violated the legacy of 1989, while another felt that, in the final analysis, freedom was more important than non-violence.<sup>25</sup> People had occasion to re-think whether non-violence should be valued as highly as freedom.)

The reason for the tremendous importance attached to non-violence lies in the violent legacy of 1956. In Hungary, everyone wished to avoid another bloody revolution. But even in the countries of repeated mass mobilizations, none of the parties wanted to initiate violence (GDR, Czechoslovakia) by consciously keeping their revolution „velvet”.

##### 5. *Extended consensualism*

The legacy of 1980-81 was a real starting point for the negotiation process, not only in Poland, but, indeed, all over East Central Europe.<sup>26</sup> In Hungary, this peaceful, deliberative approach to building consensus and democracy through negotiations had been a long and difficult process. As a result, *consensual democracy* came to be seen as the ideal form of democracy.

The negotiators consented to the continuation of transitional institutions beyond the period of transition, thereby allowing those institutions to become established as integral parts of the new democracy. This consensualism was later harshly criticized by the radical Right, which wanted a more sweeping change in the power relations of the elite. Prime Minister József Antall, leader of the governing HDF at the time, had a pithy reply to these demands. He told the radicals, if they wanted a complete change of elites, they “should have fomented a revolution” (*“tetszetek volna forradalmat csinálni”*).

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<sup>24</sup> See the minutes of the negotiations especially *ARF*, Vol. 2. Budapest: Magvető, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> A group of anti-NATO intellectuals formed a Movement for the Peace in the Balkans (Balkán Békéjéért Mozgalom), while others issued a pro-NATO declaration. These debates and manifestos can be found in the April, May, and June, 1999 issues of the weekly *Élet és Irodalom*.

<sup>26</sup> For the documents of the Gdansk negotiations see Anthony Kemp-Welch (ed.): *The Birth of Solidarity: The Gdansk Negotiations, 1980*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983.

We do not mean to suggest that we consider a broad consensualism to be the ideal form of democracy. A consensus should inevitably be reached on the institutional framework of the democratic system, as well as the forms of democratic procedures, but consensus on policy issues cannot be part of any definition of democracy. But this broadly defined notion of consensus was the, perhaps naïve, approach to democracy during the transition, influenced by many different thinkers, from Rousseau onwards, and some of the theorists of civil society.<sup>27</sup>

### 6. *Unified civil society*

Up until 1989, the victory of democracy was envisioned as a victory of *civil society* over the state. A strong state was understood to be the sign of a weak democracy and vice versa.<sup>28</sup> The achievement of the Opposition Round Table was that it transformed the dreams of a united front, and a loose umbrella organization of opposition, into the reality of a newly formed political elite. Although it can be described as internally divided and conflict-ridden, the Opposition Round Table also succeeded as a co-operative, consensus-oriented body of the opposition. Their identity was built up around the value of consensus. Civil society was somehow identified with democratic social movements, which are the fighting for real democracy against the existing institutions. Till 1989, many activists and some theorists believed political parties and governmental institutions are inherently non-democratic,<sup>29</sup> therefore those should be substituted by the unwritten, non-institutionalized, self-evident, general consensus of civil society.

However, this self-evidently positive understanding of civil society existed until the party-state was intact. The year of 1988 was rather the period of civil society (as fluid, informal, active social movements) than of 1989, when political parties tried to form, crystallize and express themselves. At the time of the round table talks in 1989, the notion of civil society still had a strong rhetorical value. But it became clear soon that the old concept of a unified civil society belongs rather to the past myths of anti-totalitarian movements rather to the practice of a future democracy based on pluralism and divided interests.

### 7. *Conflicts versus democracy*

Still it was not easy to realize that democracy is about *conflicts*; conflicting values and interests, which are openly expressed and institutionally regulated. Decisions should be made on the democratic principle of majority rule and the liberal principle of equality in the free exercise of human rights and civil liberties. As Coser, Hirschman and others pointed out, conflicts are not dysfunctional in a democracy, they are the very essence of it.<sup>30</sup> (Garton Ash even went as far to say that democracy is about the representation of half-truths.) In the round table-type of transitions it was not easy to understand that the point is not to eliminate conflicts in the name of consensualism, but to channel them through functioning democratic institutions.

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<sup>27</sup> See for instance: Janusz Ziolkowski: "The Roots, Branches, and Blossoms of Solidarnosc" in Gwyn Prins (ed.): *Spring in Winter: The 1989 Revolutions*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990. 39-63.

<sup>28</sup> Mihály Vajda: "East Central European Perspectives" in John Keane (ed.): *Civil Society and the State*. London: Verso, 1988. 333-360.

<sup>29</sup> See George (György) Konrád: *Antipolitics*. London: Methuen, 1984.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance: Lewis Coser: *The Functions of Social Conflict*. New York: Free Press, 1959.

For a while, it was difficult for the participants to distinguish between different types of conflicts (conflicting world-views versus conflicting political interests), therefore they tended to overplay and „totalize” even minor conflicts inherent to all democracies. The participants of the round table talks wanted to establish a moderate, smoothly functioning democratic regime and later they tended to stamp each other as the „enemies of democracy” in case of situations with sharpening political conflicts. They were all convinced that only their interpretation of democracy was true.

#### 8. „Back to Europe”

The political visions of the opposition were based on the idea of Hungary’s *“return to Europe”* and the new Hungarian politicians, just like politicians of other new democracies, more or less assumed that “the West” would be eager to welcome the newcomers into the world of welfare democracy. Now we can safely state that this was not so much the case. The MDF initially advocated the idea of a popular “third way”, small-scale ownership capitalism between global communism and global capitalism, but subsequently abandoned it in favor of Konrad Adenauer’s “social market economy” as the means to a safer, more gradual, and less painful transition.

Liberal parties, on the other hand, influenced by contemporary neo-liberalism, advocated a fully “liberal market economy” based on a non-interventionist state.<sup>31</sup> For a time, Finlandization served as a model for how Hungary might overcome its past, and the example of Austria’s development was repeatedly raised as well. Both cases suggested a neutral military status for Hungary, which was the best relationship with the western powers that Hungary could hope for at the time. Successful “Finlandization” policies of Finland and the neutral status of Austria or Sweden were highly valued and often quoted. Only after 1990 did some politicians begin to raise the possibility of joining NATO. At that time, the European Community (later Union) was still a far more popular option than NATO, because it was identified with social welfare, and the Hungarian population did not fear any external threat enough to be eager to join NATO. This public attitude began to change somewhat after the coup in Moscow in August 1991, and, more visibly, after the war in the former Yugoslavia.

In sum, no one from Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia questioned that these countries were part of Europe, both geographically and culturally. In their eyes, the return to the luckier peoples of the „European family” seemed to be a quick, self-evident, automatic process. They presupposed that western states would value their long struggle for democracy and would be ready to pay the price of their reintegration. Ten years ago their western counterparts seemed to be more enthusiastic to accept this idea than they are today.

The East Central European left regarded „Europeanization” as a process: a project of political and economic modernization. The Right, on the other hand, which came to power after the first election, argued that the major cultural characteristic of Europe is Christianity, which is shared by these countries. Consequently, „Europe” for them was not a program but a state, a regained status after the collapse of communism.

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<sup>31</sup> On the linguistic battles of the transition see: András Bozóki: "The Rhetoric of Action: The Language of the Regime Change in Hungary" in A. Bozóki (ed.): *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*. Budapest - New York: Central European University Press, 1999. 263-83.

## Reinventing history along European lines: 1848 - 1945 - 1989

Concerning past references, participants of the Roundtable talks in Hungary were working hard to employ both revolutionary and non-revolutionary (reformist and nation-building) traditions to popularize and legitimize the regime change. Contradictory as it was they tried to use symbols and historical events to emphasize both continuity and change. Images of reform and revolution were utilized next to each other.

### *1. The revolutionary tradition*

As we have already noted, most participants of the regime change in Hungary were eager to avoid repeating the model of action set by the 1956 revolution. Although it was the first anti-totalitarian political revolution, acknowledged like this worldwide, it still reflected on a different historical situation of the Cold War era. The only exception in judging 1956 was the radical-plebeian Hungarian October Party (*Magyar Október Párt*, MOP), which would not participate in the Roundtable talks and opted for a revolutionary strategy, thereby marginalizing itself in political life. The MOP denounced the negotiating partners as a set of elite-groups talking above the heads of the people, and implied that the parties at the Roundtable talks were only pursuing their own interests and not the common good. All the other parties were determined to move from dictatorship to democracy by non-violent means, and rejected the revolutionary path.

Still, the legacy of 1956 could not be ignored; it had to be addressed. The crushing of the revolution by the Soviets and the execution of Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister of the revolutionary government, made the political position of those who supported János Kádár, and associated themselves with his policies, morally untenable. To remind the public that the Kádár regime<sup>32</sup> had been born in a state of "original sin" was the best way for its opponents to de-legitimize the communist regime. 1956 was important in so far as it helped the opposition to distinguish itself from the Kádár-regime and to denounce it on moral grounds.

While for some speakers at the reburial of Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs Nagy was a political role model, for the young radical, Viktor Orbán, Nagy was an honorable person only because he had renounced his communist beliefs.<sup>33</sup> No one in the opposition wanted to adopt Nagy's ideas of a "democratic socialism," or follow the revolutionary practice of 1956. After June 16, 1989, when communism received its death sentence, the legacy of 1956, as the anti-communist (but not pro-capitalist) revolution faded away as well.

The participants of the Roundtable talks were obliged to search for suitable historical precedents, other than 1956. This did not prove difficult, as Hungary's long history had produced some similar patterns of change, which could offer some symbolic points of reference for the tasks of 1989. First and foremost, there was the "lawful revolution of 1848" when the strata of the lesser

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<sup>32</sup> On this see William Shawcross: *Crime and Compromise: János Kádár and the Politics of Hungary Since the Revolution*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974.

<sup>33</sup> Viktor Orbán's speech of June 16, 1989, in András Bozóki (ed.): *Tiszta lappal: A Fidesz a magyar politikában, 1988-91. /With a Clean Slate: Fidesz in Hungarian Politics, 1988-91/* Budapest: Fidesz, 1992.

nobility initiated a bloodless transition, a "glorious revolution"<sup>34</sup> from a more traditional to a more civic and liberal regime. In early 1849, too, it was the old parliament that passed the necessary bills for change, and put in power the notable Lajos Batthyány-cabinet (which included among its ministers Lajos Kossuth, István Széchenyi, and József Eötvös). Historians at the Roundtable in 1989, such as György Szabad, József Antall and others, referred often to the example of 1848 as a model worth emulating.

### *The tradition of institution-building*

Since the revolution of 1956 was crushed by Soviet troops no long-lasting institutional achievements could be used in 1989 from that revolution. The original institutions of the revolutions, the worker's councils and co-operatives, were regarded as romantic, humanistic, socialistic effort for better socialism, but they were also seen as outdated attempts for making democracy. One of the slogans of the time stated that there was no economic democracy without political democracy. (The decline of Tito's "self-organizing" worker's co-operatives in Yugoslavia<sup>35</sup> just reinforced this conviction.) Hungary and other countries had to reinvent and reconstruct examples of successful non-communist institution-building from their history.

The rebirth of political life after World War II offered a good reference point. In Hungary, bill 1946:I. on the legal status of the President of the Republic has frequently been quoted as a "little constitution" of those times.<sup>36</sup> This legislation detailed the procedure to be followed in the election of the President, and by adopting that bill, the opposition aligned itself with the *parliamentary traditions* of Hungarian politics over any other presidential system or the tradition of monarchy. Metaphorically, the post-WWII rebuilding of the country was often quoted to compare it to the enormous task of the near future. Communism was frequently compared to the destruction of war. Democratic politicians sometimes remarked bitterly that post-communist society lacked the enthusiasm and optimism of the post-WWII generation. 1945-46 was clearly seen as new beginning, even if it had been halted by the communist coup. 1945 also offered the legacy of a peacefully established democratic regime, based on a non-communist center-right umbrella party (which was the Independent Smallholders' Party at the time).

Further back to history, 1848, the "Springtime of the Peoples" provided the idea of national liberalism (which demonstrated that the more traditional values of "homeland" can be brought into harmony with the ideal of "progress"). Interestingly, 1848 was more important historical reference as peaceful institutional change than a revolution and nationwide fight for freedom and independence. Both legacies were seen as favoring institutional rearrangement rather than revolutionary upheaval.

It was an important achievement of the Hungarian Opposition Roundtable to establish the historic continuity of 1848 - 1945 - 1989, and thus to present itself as the proper heir of all the peaceful,

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<sup>34</sup> The notion of "glorious revolution" stems from the English "transition" of 1688. For the application of this term to 1989 see Ferenc Fehér & Ágnes Heller: *Kelet-Európa 'dicsőséges forradalmi' / Eastern Europe's 'Glorious Revolutions'* Budapest: T-Twins, 1992.

<sup>35</sup> On this, see Dennison Rusinow: *The Yugoslav Experiment, 1948-1974*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977.

<sup>36</sup> The text of the 1946:I. bill can be found in *ARF*, Vol. 3. 1999. 645-648.

yet radical, democratic traditions of the history of Hungary.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, both legacies were of events of a European scale. 1848, 1945 and 1989 were not just been Hungarian or East European, but, first and foremost, European events. The project of return could be well based on those events understandable to the West. Poland rediscovered the legacy of General Józef Pilsudski,<sup>38</sup> while Havel, the newly elected president of Czechoslovakia referred often to an early “founding father”, Tomas G. Masaryk.<sup>39</sup> Other countries, liberated from the Soviet Union in 1990-91, tried to dig deeper to reconstruct national, liberal, and/or democratic traditions from their pre-Soviet past, back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Latvia, for instance, reinstalled its 1922 constitution. In Hungary, despite some right-wing governmental efforts to revitalize the Horthy era (1919-44) and to make it somehow more respected, past nostalgia embraced rather pre-World War I. Austria-Hungary, and the progressive legacies of the dualist Monarchy (as the era of economic development, constitutional liberalism, early federalism etc.). These elements gave the idea for Jürgen Habermas to claim that these transitions were, in fact, “rectifying revolutions” (*Nachholende revolution*), which tried to recover continuities and to reconnect present societies to the broken, pre-communist past.<sup>40</sup>

The idea of *Central Europe* had different meanings in the 1980s.<sup>41</sup> First, and foremost, it was the legacy of dissent and the recurrent fights for freedom in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Second, by the revitalization of Central Europe, most people thought a project to recreate historical similarities between cities like Krakow, Prague, Dresden, Vienna, Bratislava, Kosice, Budapest, Cluj, Brasov, Timisoara, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Trieste. Third, it had some historical resonance to the Hapsburg Europe as a reference in the post-Iron Curtain period. Fourth, and finally, some people, revived the pre-WWI German concept of *Mittleuropa* advocated by Friedrich Naumann and other German national liberals. These thoughts, however, have been partly swept away by the attractivity of a larger unit, the European Union. The idea of Central Europe, however, has not been forgotten, rather it contributed to the formation of the so-called Visegrád-countries, a co-operation between Poland, Czecho-Slovakia, and Hungary after 1991.<sup>42</sup>

Among foreign historical and political precedents, explicit references were made to the Spanish path to democracy in the 1970s, after the death of Franco. In Hungary, both the government and the opposition studied the Spanish transition quite thoroughly.<sup>43</sup> The most obvious historical

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<sup>37</sup> See especially the contributions of József Antall in the August 29 meeting of the Opposition Round Table. See: János Kis: "1989: a víg esztendő" /The Merry Year/ *Beszélő*, Vol.4. No.10, 1999. 22-46. For the documents, see: *ARF*, Vol. 3. 1999. 520-653.

<sup>38</sup> See Andrzej Garlicki: *Józef Pilsudski, 1867-1935*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> See Edward P. Newman: *Masaryk*. London-Dublin: Champion Press, 1960.

<sup>40</sup> Jürgen Habermas: "What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left" *New Left Review*, 183. September-October 1990. 3-21.

<sup>41</sup> See George Schöpflin & Nancy Wood (eds.): *In Search of Central Europe*. Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1989.; Timothy Garton Ash: *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*. New York: Vintage, 1990.; Stephen Borsody: *The New Central Europe*. Boulder: East European Monographs, 1993.

<sup>42</sup> See Béla K. Király & András Bozóki (eds.): *Lawful Revolution in Hungary, 1989-94*. Boulder: Social Science Monographs, distributed by the Columbia University Press, 1995.

<sup>43</sup> Polish dissidents were already aware of the importance of the Spanish path in the 1970s and 80s. (See Michnik's "New Evolutionism"). In Hungary, a group of Spanish politicians and scholars visited Hungary in the summer of 1989 and met the representatives of the Opposition Round Table. On the

precedent for the Hungarians was, of course, Poland. The ideas of an "ethical civil society"<sup>44</sup> and the new evolutionism were taken from the Polish opposition. Members of the Polish and Hungarian opposition had had frequent personal contacts, and long-standing friendships linked Hungarian dissidents (Kis, Demszky, Rajk Jr. and others) with those in Poland (Michnik, Kuron, Smolar, etc.). Activists of the new Hungarian trade unions were eager to establish links with Solidarity as well, in order to learn some of their negotiation strategies.

## Conclusions

The Roundtable negotiations of 1989 created an unprecedented historical situation in Hungary and some other countries in which a political elite was able to draft a constitution and create the institutional frameworks of a democracy without bloodshed. Was it, after all, a clear break the old regime and a new beginning of a democratic one?

In the categories of Hannah Arendt a revolution has two sides: An extrication from the old regime and the beginning of the construction of a new institutional order.<sup>45</sup> In Hungary, the break with the past occurred rather symbolically on June 16, 1989, when the Prime Minister of the 1956 revolution, Imre Nagy, and his fellow-martyrs were reburied officially. On that day the Kádár-regime collapsed morally.) Kádár, himself, died three weeks later, while rule of law was introduced with the ratification of the new constitution on the 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the revolution, in October 1989. This moment in June made clear that 1989 fulfilled many claims of the revolution without replaying it or implementing all of its visions, many of them burdened with illusions) for the future.

After the reburial of Imre Nagy, the second phase of the revolutionary process began. The phase of reconstruction occurred at the negotiating table during the trilateral negotiations between June and September 1989. These negotiations could be interpreted both in the framework of the old and new regimes. On the one hand, it was a "social debate", characteristic element of the communist legislative process. On the other hand, it was a functional equivalent of a "constitutional assembly" an emblematic feature of all major revolutions. Participants of this constitutional revolution acted without popular legitimacy but they presupposed the existence of popular support.

Since nobody elected the participants of the Roundtable talks, so they were eager and worked hard to get some positive feedback from the society. During the course of the Round Table talks, the establishment of the institutional order of the new regime preceded the popular legitimacy of the "founding fathers". And that made a difference, because usually the logic of revolutionary action is the following: 1. the destruction of the old regime; 2. the revolutionary/popular legitimacy of the "founding fathers"; and finally, 3. the creation of the new institutions of the new regime. In Hungary, however, after the first step came the third, and then the second one. The institutional order and its creators were legitimized in March 1990 only, at the first free elections.

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other hand, the Hungarian government was interested in the Spanish case in order to learn how to keep transition processes controlled.

<sup>44</sup> On this, see: Juan J. Linz & Alfred Stepan: *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. (The chapter on Poland.)

<sup>45</sup> Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1963.

Perhaps, that is exactly the reason why the Roundtable talks mean a mixed tradition and became somehow ambivalent legacies in the past twenty years. Those were not seen as a "clean" process. The negotiations of 1989 were tainted by the inclusion of the former communists: MSZMP leaders also had their say in the creation of the new democracy. Although they were sitting on the *other side* of the table, they were undeniably there. Some think it corrupted the genesis of the new democracy, because it means negotiations, i.e. talks, communications, compromises, interactions, personal contacts between the outgoing and incoming elite. It represented by the collaboration of democratic and non-democratic elite groups, instead of a clear-cut revolutionary change. Therefore, the legacy of 1989, the "negotiated revolution" is an increasingly uneasy tradition for those who would prefer to repaint themselves as uncompromising revolutionaries.

If we analyse the outcome of the Roundtable negotiations, we should say that the benefits were far more significant than the costs. The costs have been mainly psychological, observable in public morale: People feel that something was done without their participation, that the economic transformation and the redistribution of wealth were effected without democratic controls. They feel they have somehow been robbed by the emerging big business. The managers, the technocratic elite -- all those who were already co-opted by the Kádárist elite in the 1980s -- are viewed as the ultimate winners of the transformation. Ordinary people tend to think that they were the victims of communism before the regime change, only to become the victims of globalization after the regime change.

In the narrower arena of political transformation, there was a clear *elite settlement*, a rapid re-negotiation of the political and legal-institutional situation.<sup>46</sup> The transformation of the economic sphere, however, was effected through a more complex mix of elite settlement, elite co-optation and convergence. These were parallel processes.

The old regime had collapsed and the institutions, created in the negotiations of 1989, survived for the next twenty years. Groups of the elite, people, mentalities, practices, and the popular perceptions of change – all of these changed much less. For the Central European societies, however, Europe is not understood as a divider but a uniter. All major political groupings, with the exception of the extremists, agree to 'return' to 'Europe', whatever they mean by it.

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<sup>46</sup> Michael G. Burton & John Higley: "Elite Settlements" *American Sociological Review*, 52. 1987. 295-307.; John Higley & Michael G. Burton: "The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns" *American Sociological Review*, 54. 1989. 17-32.; John Higley, Jan Pakulski & Włodzimierz Wesolowski (eds.): *Postcommunist Elites and Democracy in Eastern Europe*. London: Macmillan, 1998.