

Oxana Gaman-Golubina & Andrey Klemerhev  
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A. Bozóki

### Populism as Elite Discourse in Hungary

*The article analyzes the problem of populism as a discourse of contemporary Hungarian elites. The author points out that populism is flexible enough to complement the neo-liberal policies, and is able to be combined with democracy and "semi-democracy" and the complete absence of democracy.*

**Key words:** Hungary, the elite, populism, discourse.

Populism, which once was a feature of the Hungarian 'népi' (popular) writers' movement, and was preserved in a cultural tradition throughout the 20th century, appeared in different waves in the last decades. Populist ideas and policies never had the chance to provide a political alternative in a totalitarian and authoritarian dictatorship. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the faith of these political ideas was not clear. Moreover, its form — whether it would be a political idea ('middle-of-the-road'), or a political style, or a political practice that is suitable for every purpose — was not clear either. Recently, populism reappeared in a form of nationalist «package» of neoliberal economic policies.

Concerning its nature, populism has induced many radical ideas. Some thought it to be the ideological cover of fascism or the radical right, others believed it to be a statist economic policy, that could appear not only on the right but on the anti-liberal left as well, which was defending its position. Others thought that populism is a rather harmless phenomenon, because democracy cannot exist without some elements of populism in it; therefore populism is simply a demagogic way of speaking, a political style. Judging populism proved to be as controversial as the attempts at describing it, not only for those in politics but for observers as well.

In the following, I aim to establish a typology of Hungarian populism:

1. as fusion of nationalism and socialism in the interwar period;
2. as cultural nationalism in the communist period;
3. as a form of discourse by intellectuals in politics during and after the transition;
4. as form of anti-globalist and anti-liberal discourse at the millennium; and
5. as fusion of nationalism and neo-liberalism in the «New Right» during the most recent economic crisis.

### Introduction: The Birth of Hungarian Capitalism and Its Social Discontents

The development of Hungarian society was induced from above and from the side of the border, and compared to the modernization of the West it was belated. The defeated Hungarian revolution of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century failed to reach national independence, and it was at first part of the Habsburg Monarchy, and after the 1867 Compromise with the Austrians, it became equal to Austria in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In the period between 1867 and 1914 the

economy developed rapidly, the railway network of the country was developed; and the capital Budapest became a metropolis. The Czech and German skilled workers as well as the emigrating Jewish traders played a significant role in this economic boom. An urban-bourgeois Hungary was in the making, its growing attraction was in a direct contrast to the backward rural peasantry. However, in the relationship between the gentry and the unfolding bourgeois, the former remained the decisive, it was not the nobility that developed a bourgeois mentality, but the thinner bourgeois strata was adjusting itself to the gentry.<sup>1</sup> Assimilation to the Hungarians was synonymous to the assimilation to the values and attitudes of the gentry middle class as an estate. Thus embourgeoisement, capitalist development and modernity were expressed in contrast to the 'organically' developed character of Hungarians: those who expressed the values of Hungarians often confronted them with the bourgeois-European values. The elements of the «homeland and progress» program, elaborated in the Reform Age in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were fatally simple to be turned against each other. The true 'patriot' looked at the 'Jewish' capitalism with suspicion, while the representatives of the growing capitalist class cared very little about the problem of national independence. Budapest imitated Paris, and its cosmopolitan atmosphere became increasingly alien to the backward countryside, regarded as provincial by the capital.

The Social Democratic Party of the age was just as much an urban phenomenon as the representation of the bourgeois political parties, hence it was unable to channel and handle the social tensions accumulating in the countryside. The political rise of these strata that were squeezed below society was equally suppressed by the politics of the gentry and the big estates and of liberalism. Thus, a broad-based authentic agrarian party could not develop in Hungary. What developed, however, represented the interests of landed Smallholders only, and the party gradually lost some of its social sensitivity and hence much of its significance in its bargains with gentry politics. The poor peasantry turned to religious sects that were advocating anarchistic principles, and instead of making new attempts to express their political will they turned away from politics.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Populism as fusion of nationalism and socialism: The interwar period

The World War meant an end to the hegemony of liberalism and conservatism all around Europe; new collectivist ideologies and movements (replacing the former ones in several cases) appeared: nationalism and socialism. The First World War and its tragic ending, which meant for Hungary the loss of two-thirds of its previous territory, deeply shocked the entire society.

The first significant Hungarian populist ideologist, Dezső Szabó already assessed the outbreak of the war as the «failure of individualism». According to him, liberalism committed the sin of neglecting the collective identity of the society and the war was a punishment.<sup>3</sup> Ideologists of liberalism were forced into the defensive, at first against socialists and syndicalists, then against nationalists. Following the revolution of 1918, the social-liberal government could not dissolve the tensions caused by the shock of the defeat in the war. Although, it at-

<sup>1</sup> Ferenc Erdei (1943), «A magyar társadalom a két háború között» (The Hungarian society in the interwar period), Paper presented at the conference in Szárszó. It was republished in *Szárszó*, 1943. Budapest: Magvető: 1984.

<sup>2</sup> András Bozóki and Miklós Sükösd (1987), «Agrárszocializmus és ideális anarchizmus» (Agrarian socialism and ideal anarchism), *Medvetánc* 7 (2): 293—319; For more details see András Bozóki and Miklós Sükösd, eds. (1998), *Magyar anarchizmus*. (Hungarian Anarchism) Budapest: Balassi.

<sup>3</sup> Dezső Szabó (1914), «Az individualizmus csődje» (The failure of individualism), *Huszedik Század*.

tempted to pursue a radical policy in the social field, it proved to be weak; and for a transitory period of four months power was shifted to the hands of communists. After the fall of the communist dictatorship, in the autumn of 1919, a right-wing 'Christian-national' restoration began, and gradually consolidated itself. The ruling circles blamed liberalism for the war and for the temporary expansion of Bolshevism. Therefore, the moderate liberalism of the pre-1914 period could not return; the new course (in the East European understanding of the term) could be characterized by a conservative, authoritarian, revanchist policy. In contrast with Peronism, the Horthy-regime was unable and did not intend to involve the anti-liberal democratic forces. The politically articulated part of Hungarian society was split in two: besides the dominant 'neo-baroque' national-historical society, there was a weaker bourgeois society, which had developed under the capitalist growth. Below them there was a big mass of rural uneducated peasantry, which was left without political representation and was equally despised by the politics of the gentry and the bourgeoisie.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1920s the ideologists of the Hungarian '*népi*' (populist) movement realized that if they wanted to make a stronger impact they must unite the national and the social radicalism. In their opinion, the two revolutions (the bourgeois one in 1918, and the Bolshevik one on 1919) failed because they were socially radical but not nationally. Also, the emancipatory movements against social oppression could renew themselves only if they were able to open to the nation, or more precisely to the people. This renewal must come from the suppressed strata, from the peasantry, the new Hungarian middle class should be created out of them (because the existing middle class is of alien origin) and this new class, which is committed to the people, would be the promoter of social transformation. Peasantry means the people, and the people must be identical with the nation. This program was drawn up by Dezső Szabó in the early 1920s, in his series of articles entitled: «Towards a New Hungarian Ideology»<sup>5</sup>.

The '*népi*' (populist) movement was recruited from the company and followers of Dezső Szabó, László Németh and Gyula Illyés, and although it had members of peasant origins, it remained largely a middle class group of intellectuals. The populist writers of the 1930s were the 'Hungarian Narodniks' who, similar to their 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian predecessors, considered it their mission to mingle in 'the people,' and to document the problems of rural Hungary; the decreasing population, the spread of religious sects, the poverty and the issue of land ownership. They hoped to achieve the reformation of government politics by honestly exhibiting the real and cruel life of the peasants.<sup>6</sup> Their intention proved to be illusionary, even though populist writers personally contacted members of the governing circles. Later on, some of them drifted towards the political extreme right, whereas others towards the extreme left (the illegal Communist Party); but the core of the group of writers remained together and founded the National Peasant Party in 1938. This party however, because of its intellectual qualities, never became really influential, and after 1945 it became a 'fellow-traveler,' a closely co-operating ally of communists.

The main issue concentrated on the unity or separation of political democracy and social reforms. Was social equality possible without democracy? Would the intentions of social reforms of an authoritarian system be acceptable? Although there are certain analyses that sharply separate left and right wing populisms,<sup>7</sup> populism is primarily characterized by

<sup>4</sup> Ferenc Erdei (1943), op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Dezső Szabó (1923), «Új magyar ideológia felé» (Toward a new Hungarian ideology), *Auróra, Élet és Irodalom*.

<sup>6</sup> Dénes Németh (1985), *A népi szociográfia* (Populist sociography). Budapest: Magvető.

<sup>7</sup> László Percz (1992), «A nép és az ő barátai: változatok a jobboldali populizmusra» (The people and their friends: variations for Rightist populism), *Kritika* (1): 13–16.

a denial of this dichotomy, and is a mixture of the elements of leftism and rightism. Even in predominantly left wing populism references to the nation can be found, and in predominantly right wing populist rhetoric social considerations appear.

While the Hungarian movement of populist writers considered the solution of the peasant issue to be one of its most important tasks, its attitude towards the peasantry becoming bourgeois was rather ambivalent. Besides the need for social democratization, it wanted, rather romantically, to preserve certain traits of the peasant way of life, more over, it wanted to base — at the same time Hungarian and social — democracy, on this, which it considered 'deeper' than the one in Western Europe.<sup>8</sup> Putting emphasis on the national and social aspects laid the course for many of the representatives of the movement towards the racist extreme right or towards the communist extreme left. Characteristically, in Eastern Europe, the populist movements received greater sympathy from proto-fascist and communist groups, than liberals, social democrats and ruling national conservatives. The latter expressed reservations towards such movements. For communists however, the appearance of the populist movements represented the possibility of a future alliance between the working class and the peasantry, in the spirit of the revolutionary strategy and the policy of alliances of Lenin. The fascists regarded them as the natural continuation of the right wing movements of agrarian societies, who turned against the aliens symbolizing cosmopolitan lifestyle, and particularly against the Jews by an idealization of the peasantry.<sup>9</sup> The relationship of the Hungarian extreme right and the writers' movement is fittingly described by the following fact: the former criticized the popular writers' movement because by emphasizing the issue of land reform and large estates it diverted attention from the Jewish question. On the other hand, the majority of the populists, who did not interpret the social reforms in terms of protecting the races, felt that the extreme right was the one that diverted the attention from the truly important issue: the land reform.<sup>10</sup> During the war in Hungary, no populist government policy could evolve.

The middle class was thin and weak: its majority of national sentiment made a compromise with the Horthy regime, its bourgeois groups, for reasons of their Jewish origins, were forced into the defensive against the representatives of the regime, and their isolation made it impossible for them to form a broader social coalition.

The peasantry was squeezed below society, and for this reason it was unable to articulate its interests itself, and to enter into political alliance. The popular writers attempted to close this social gap with their activities, but they themselves proved to be of limited influence: neither the political class of the Horthy regime, nor the national middle class, that entered into a compromise with the regime, or the isolated bourgeois strata, and not even the targeted peasantry could have been mobilized by them. Thus the function of their writings remained primarily to keep social self-conscience alive.

## 2. Populism as cultural nationalism in the Communist period

The defeat suffered during World War II, the following brief spell of democracy and the communist change of 1948 fundamentally transformed the structure of Hungarian society.

<sup>8</sup> Pál Szalai (1987), «A magyar radikalizmus helyzete 1945—1947 között a *Haladás* című hetilap tükrében» (The situation of Hungarian radicalism between 1945—1947 in the mirror of the journal *Haladás*), manuscript.

<sup>9</sup> Ghita Ionescu (1969), «Eastern Europe,» in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*. London Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 117.

<sup>10</sup> István Bibó (1986), «Levél Borbándi Gyulához» (Letter to Gyula Borbándi), in Tibor Huszár and István Vida, eds., *Bibó István: Válogatott tanulmányok* (István Bibó: Selected essays). Budapest: Magvető, 307.



The gentry elite was wiped out, a large part of the bourgeois middle class was destroyed by the War. In the 1940s many people emigrated from both strata. In the 1945 land reform more than one million peasants were given land, which was subsequently forced onto kolkhozes. A larger proportion of the rural poor was absorbed by forced industrialization. The 'soft dictatorship' of the reformist politics of consolidation launched by János Kádár in the 1960s, was able to make the society digest the shock of the 1940s and 1950s. The issues raised by the populist writers (large estates, land, agrarian poverty) became obsolete.

Populist thought however, survived in a cultural form, linked to literature. It played a role in the revival of national traditions. Thus it tried to make populist cultural heritage a national one, and also to maintain the idea of «middle of the road» — which had a different meaning earlier — equally turning against Western liberal capitalism and Eastern internationalist communism. Populists found internationalism common to both, and similarly to the New Left, they condemned the economic influence of the Western multinational concerns as well as the power monopoly of the Soviet type system. They regarded both as foreign oppression. Communist cultural policy, associated with the name of György Aczél, tried to use their reappearance to divide the opposition; appearing also in the late 1970s, suggesting, that the two kinds of — Western and populist — criticism could not have a common platform, as the «urbanists» were Jewish, and the 'népi' (populists) were not. This whispering propaganda, which was amplified by the populists at the time of systemic change,<sup>11</sup> has again made anti-Semitism and the conflict between Jews and non-Jews a (not so transparent) political issue. It meant a past anachronism for the younger generations that have grown up in the shadow of the Kádár-system and have heard about the «Jewish question» and the populist vs. urbanist conflict only from history books.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Populism as discourse of literary intellectuals who entered politics in the transition years

By the second part of the 1980s, the cultural criticism of popular origins was replaced by the organization of political movements with the pluralization of the intelligentsia and the society,<sup>13</sup> and the Hungarian Democratic Forum, which was established as a loose intellectual association in Lakitelek in September 1987, was transformed into a political organization a year later. Not accepting «either the tag of pro-government or of opposition and the pressure of choice»<sup>14</sup> initially the Forum did not function as a party, yet it was active as a party that collected groups from a wide range. Populist thinking emerged from its purely cultural forms and reappeared on the political stage. It reappeared under such historical conditions that its effect could become far greater than that of the former National Peasant Party. The disappearance of the Soviet oppression, the return of national sovereignty, the seeming 'classlessness' of the Kádár era, the desire for a welfare society and the lack of new political ideas apparently strengthened the assumption that the time may have come for the renaissance of populism.

<sup>11</sup> Sándor Csoóri (1991), *Nappali hold* (Daytime moon). Budapest: Püski; István Csurka (1991), *Vasárnapi jegyzetek* (Sunday notes). Budapest: Püski-Magyar Fórum.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. «Népiek és urbánusok — egy mítosz vége» (Populists and Urbanists — end of a myth)? (1989) *Századvég* (2)

<sup>13</sup> Sándor Agócs and Endre Medvigy, eds. (1991), *A magyarság esélyei. Lakitelek, 1987. A tanácskozás hiteles jegyzőkönyve* (The chances of Hungarians. Lakitelek, 1987. The official record). Budapest—Lakitelek: Antológia—Püski.

<sup>14</sup> «Az MDF alapítólevele» (The founding charter of the MDF), (1988), *Hitel*, November, 50—51.

Despite the occasional lack of legitimacy of the new democratic regime in Hungary, the chances of national (dominantly right wing) as well as social (dominantly left wing) populist politics proved to be limited in the first part of the 1990s. It was partly due to the heritage of the «soft communist» past of the Kádár regime, and partly to more general economic and political characteristics, such as:

In the Kádár-regime the majority of the society followed individualist strategies of survival, and during the course of acquiring these strategies, people had become less and less susceptible to political demagoguery.

Long after the fall of communism, the size of those groups that had nothing to lose was limited, their conditions were deteriorating, and this kept them from supporting such political actions.

Politics appealing to the people, and alluding to a state-defined concept of justice, had been present in Hungary in extreme forms (fascism, communism), and have caused serious damage and backwardness. The memories of these were alive for a long time. Hungary after 1989 was more a post-populist society than a pre-populist one.<sup>15</sup>

The soft dictatorship of the Kádár era had created the still functioning informal patron-client lines, along which people could assert their interests informally, and compensate for the losses suffered in the economic transformation.

In the first years of communist rule in Hungary, in the 1950s, society had the opportunity to see the disadvantages of 'personality cult,' and thus became sceptic towards. The relative popularity of Kádár was the result of the fact that he was against political personalism.

The small size of the country and its dependence upon world economy limited the space of economic nationalism, which is a feature of populism. The broad masses of the Hungarian society see no alternative to the desirable Western welfare democracies. There was no massive aversion to the penetration of Western capital experienced in Hungarian society, people want to have their share of the benefits.

In the society, during — and for a while after — the regime change, the intelligentsia that was committed to the ideals of democratic participation and autonomy of the individual was quite influential.

For the decisive social strata, those who could take part in a conflict, the concept of capitalism and democracy seemed to belong together. The social strata, which would have been able to produce Latin American type of populism, form an alliance and demand democracy as well as authoritarian paternalism was missing.

Populism usually evolves in places where considerable social groups believe that there is much to be distributed, so they hope that by changing the internal proportions of social redistribution, they might find themselves in a more favorable position. But no such belief was apparent in Hungary.

A characteristic feature of liberalism is confidence in the role of the state, but in Hungary such confidence and the expectations resulting from it were missing; and even if they had existed, the weak state heavily in debt was not in a position to meet these expectations.

Paradoxically, the relatively strong anti-state attitude of the Hungarian society in the 1990s did not only weaken the credibility of the new democracy (which could not exist without an accepted authority of the state), but it also hindered the development of populism.

The chances of populist mobilization were further reduced by the sad fact, that there were groups that were turning away from politics, were falling behind, and even formed ghettos, which could not be mobilized by any kind of political agitation, not even by populism.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Béla Greskovits (1993), «Dominant Economy, Subordinated Politics: The Absence of Eastern Europe», Working Paper No. 1. CEU: Department of Political Science; see also Béla Greskovits (1997), *Political Economy of Protest and Patience*. Budapest-New York: Central European University Press.

This situation started to change with the austerity package of 1995 associated with the name of minister of finance, Lajos Bokros, a promoter of shock therapy. At the beginning, dissatisfied groups, those that were sinking into poverty and falling behind, oriented themselves towards the extreme right to a lesser extent, and to a greater extent towards the old-school socialists. Thus, the mixture of left and right, which crosses class boundaries, and has an autonomous character has gained influence. In the 1998 election campaign Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Party (Fidesz—MPP) and the Independent Smallholders' Party (*Független Kisgazdapárt*, FKGP) relied on those strata that were susceptible to populist politics.

#### 4. Populism as anti-globalism and anti-liberalism

To some extent groups that have been disappointed by the regime change of 1989, strengthened the camp of populism,<sup>16</sup> therefore they demanded the consistent completion of systemic change, or in other words, the replacement of the elite, a «second» or «permanent» revolution,<sup>17</sup> and also want the strongly state controlled privatization. In addition to Hungarian Justice and Life Party (*Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja*, MIÉP) this heterogeneous group comprises: some Smallholders groups; members of the Hungarian Market Party; former fighters of the revolution of 1956; political prisoners; former followers of plebeian democrat, György Krassó<sup>18</sup> and groups that are dissatisfied with compensation, or attack the Constitutional Court because it annulled their plans of doing justice. Here can be mentioned those as well, who believe that the revolution 'withered,' the original goals were betrayed; and who demand a broad-based national unity instead of the 'policy of pacts' of the parties.<sup>19</sup> The representative meeting of these groups was held in August 1993 in Balatonszárszó, in the spirit of anti-liberalism.<sup>20</sup> The addresses of this meeting indicated that the coalition of the populist-nationalist and national conservatives, created at the end of 1989, had been in disintegration.<sup>21</sup> The anti-institutional argumentation is similar, but the rhetoric employs the concepts of civil society in the case of organizations such as the «Committee of Social Adjustment» the «Intellectual-Moral Parliament» or the «Civic Movement for the Republic». Economic nationalism, almost always accompanying populist politics, appears in these groups: it is mostly them who object to, and hence wish to limit the inflow of foreign capital, or who want to prohibit the purchase of land by foreigners once and for all.

The initiative of the Association of People Living Below Subsistence Level (*Létminimum Alatt Élők Társasága*, LÁÉT) at the end of 1992 may be regarded in many respects as an «underclass» populist experience, because it aimed at creating a social coalition going beyond the poor strata and crossing boundaries for the support of it demands. At first the Association organized a hunger strike against the anti-social policy of the government, and

<sup>16</sup> András Bozóki and Miklós Sükösd (1992), «Civil társadalom és populizmus a kelet-európai demokratikus átmenetben» (Civil society and populism in Eastern European democratic transitions), *Mozgó Világ* 18 (8): 100—112.

<sup>17</sup> Ferenc Fehér and Ágnes Heller (1992), «Jobboldali permanens forradalom» (Permanent revolution of the political right?) in Ferenc Fehér and Ágnes Heller (1992), *Kelet-Európa «dicsőséges forradalmai»* (The 'Glorious Revolutions' of Eastern Europe). Budapest: T-Twins, 197—202.

<sup>18</sup> The followers of György Krassó were members of the Hungarian October Party between 1989 and 1991.

<sup>19</sup> Zoltán Bíró (1993), *Elhervadt forradalom* (Faded revolution). Budapest: Püski; Imre Pozsgay (1993), *1989. Politikuspálya a pártállamban és a rendszerváltásban* (Political career in the Party State and the regime change). Budapest: Püski.

<sup>20</sup> For details see the articles of the *Szárszó Fórum* (1993) 1(1—8), August 23—30.

<sup>21</sup> József Bauer (1993), «Lakitelektől Kenderesig — és vissza?» (From Lakitelek to Kenderes — and back?) *Népszabadság*, 4. September p. 25.

next it collected hundred thousand signatures for a plebiscite that would oblige the government to dissolve itself before the elections were due. This was an initiative coming from below, which successfully utilized the general dissatisfaction of the public against the Parliament and the parties, and could turn against the entire political elite. The plebiscite was not held; hence the real actual opinion of the society remained unknown. However, when the Constitutional Court declared the initiative anti-constitutional, it did not provoke a new wave of protest across society, which shows that the action of the LÁÉT was not based on a real multi-class alliance, but expressed only the dissatisfaction of the poorest strata.

After the shock of political and economic transition, the political class in power had to face the challenge of democratic consolidation. In theory, consolidation is the policy of social peace, healing of wounds and the common prosperity to a gradually widening segment of the population. A policy that encourages a diversity of identities, instead of forcing them into the over-simplified, dichotomy-based worlds of the political left and right. Liberal democracy can secure both freedom in politics and freedom from politics at the same time — for this reason, the idea of «permanent revolution» is alien to its rhetoric and essence.

The New Right coalition government led by Viktor Orbán in the 1998–2002 period attempted to consolidate with the means of a «second revolution.» As it soon came out, consolidation could not be concluded by widening the gap between groups. Consolidation could not be done by reducing it to one dimension, namely to the extremist dichotomy of friend or foe. In 1998 Viktor Orbán might have felt that it was the last moment to rearrange power structures. The program «more than government change» was an effort to modernize the right, to build a «Fidesz-Hungary» to help taking root a new political structure — very different from the socialist one — oligarchy and social support. He believed that it was better if two oligarchies compete for power, than if there is just one. He made the effort to organize a possible economic and social base for the contest of this «two Hungaries.» Instead of social reforms he saw it as his mission to change the elite, secure key positions for his people, construct a new base of support, and construct an institutional background for Fidesz-Hungary once and for all. He could not align the majority of the people with his program.

The major mistake of the first Orbán government was to identify the political community with the cultural community (even though the latter notion was only with reference to the right) and it caused his defeat. It is one of the basic characteristics of liberal democracy that political and cultural communities are utterly different: any number of cultural communities might peacefully coexist within a single political one. Anyone trying to force an existing (and culturally heterogeneous) political community to follow the norms of one specific cultural community loudly proclaims that he is not committed to the principles of liberal democracy. The first Fidesz government tried to balance the division of the political community with the reconstruction of the imaginary cultural community of the nation outside the borders. It became more important what Orbán considered himself to be the leader of a country or of a state? While he was constantly making reference to the 15 million Hungarians, the citizens felt that he was only realizing the interest of voters on the right; and it caused tensions in the policy of the Orbán-government. When he argued for the spiritual strengthening of Hungarians and reuniting them (which brought with itself the suspicion of being nationalistic), the left side of the country could easily have felt that this rhetoric of the spiritual reunification of Hungarians across borders was only used to make people accept the symbolic and normative structure of an imaginary cultural community that was dear to the government. It was capable of causing fear.

Voters of Hungary were unlikely to have any objections against a successful, pragmatic, consolidating, right government, but the thought that this government might aim at



changing their values, norms and customs inspired fear among them. It seemed that the first Orbán-government inclined to restructure the entire society from above, with the values and models of one particular cultural group. With the policy of social mobilization, Orbán redrew the political map, as it had happened in the 1940s and 1950s in Argentina under President Juan Perón, or in the 1990s in Croatia under Franjo Tudjman, and in Slovakia under Vladimir Meciar. All these countries saw the supporters of autocratic democracy opposing the supporters of liberal democracy. Similar move was observable in Italy in 2001, where the former power of the multiple parties has disappeared, and the frontline of political struggle lied between pro-Berlusconi and anti-Berlusconi groups. Some observers compared it to the U.K. governed by Blair.<sup>22</sup> The Hungarian election campaign of 2002 saw the fierce and emotionally overheated fright of the pro-Orbán and anti-Orbán political coalitions. The «cold civil war» took the shape of a hot campaign. Although Fidesz-MPP lost the election politically, Orbán still managed to create a «second Hungary», with its own cultural milieu, which survived despite the electoral defeats.

This sort of political style is often called populist policy. When a democratic process is represented as a choice between life and death, truth and lie, past and future, good and evil. Populism also entails a re-definition of the role to the state, by emphasizing that it dispenses and is paternalistic. Other characteristics of populism are: a kind of economic nationalism, a moralistic rhetoric constantly referring to the idea of the nation and justice, a steady process of searching out and stigmatizing the «enemies of the nation» (traitors within, communists, Big Business, financial oligarchy, cosmopolitan intellectuals and so on), and the polarization and reduction of political pluralism to a one single dimension. During those few years political competition did not center around different programs and rationally debatable arguments but was reduced to a passionate and symbolically mediated meta-political war of «us vs. them» which was justified with «cultural» reasons. National symbols (the flag, the circle ribbon, and the national anthem) that represent the unity of the nation were appropriated by Fidesz and its supporters, thus stressing the idea of division. The slogan known from football «Go Hungary» and «Go Hungarians» became the campaign slogan of the party, similarly to the «Forza Italia!»<sup>23</sup> The community of national politics was identified with the circle of Fidesz-MPP supporters, and they were called upon to «defend the nation»<sup>24</sup>. Soon it was evident that populism did not need intellectuals, only propagandists.

One of the most important components of a populist policy that is centered on a leader is a technique of personalization of power. This was reinforced by television, and a culture of commercials and video clips, that acquired in the past decade the power to form the minds of people, and the process of overall commercialization. Modern democracy is, in many ways, a media democracy, a campaign democracy. In such a world, anyone who can simplify his ideas and communicate real or apparent truths in a watered-down but credible way gets the upper hand. Most people prefer parties that transform politics into a visual experience as opposed to those that convey their policies using the classic devices of verbal debates and programs. Feeling it becomes more important than conscious understanding

<sup>22</sup> András Körösenyi (2001), «Parlamentáris vagy 'elnöki' kormányzás? Az Orbán-kormány összehasonlító politológiai perspektívából (Parliamentary or 'presidential' governance? The Orbán-government from a comparative political perspective).» *Századvég* Vol 5. 3—38.

<sup>23</sup> György Petőcz (2002), «Forza Hungaria! Olasz-Magyar párhuzamok (Forza Hungaria! Italian and Hungarian parallels).» in Miklós Sükösd and Mária Vásárhelyi, eds., *Hol a határ? Kampanystratégiák és kampányetika, 2002* (Where is the limit? Campaign strategy and campaign ethics, 2002). Budapest: Élet és Irodalom, 232—240.

<sup>24</sup> For more details, see the speech of Viktor Orbán delivered at the University of Physical Education on April 9, 2002, see the April 10, 2002 issues of *Népszabadság* and *Magyar Nemzet*.

and acceptance. These feelings are most accessible through those charismatic personalities who communicate the message of the party. If there exists such a charismatic personality, then the message can become meta-political: instead of a confrontation of political programs, symbols, tokens of belief, religious or quasi-religious convictions clash. The personality that conveys the message becomes the message itself. This way the political leader becomes the leader of a charismatic group that is similar to a religious community, and becomes a figure who is central to the experience, and whose politics give those youth who are searching for identity the opportunity to «feel» it. In a «leader-democracy»,<sup>25</sup> for the follows of the policy it conveys the message of experience, immersion and a sense of belonging together; ideologies become identities; the rational-argumentative type of policy becomes a policy of identity.

At the millennium it already became visible that large segments of Hungarian society felt a need for this type of claustrophobic, anti-liberal, commanding behavior. Those living in the countryside needed it more than people living in towns did. They could feel that there is someone who tells them in an understandable and simple, yet intellectual way, what should be done in that irrational, decadent and confusing world.

During the period of the first Orbán-government changes took place in the manner of exercising power. These include changes in the political communication, in making politics more dynamic, in conditioning people to think long term, (a picture of the future), and aspiring to make politicians more comprehensible clear to common people.

One of the lessons to be learned from the 1998–2002 electoral period is that in democracy, political and cultural community are two different things. In one political community more than one cultural community can exist side by side, because democracy considers the groups to which different religions, lifestyles, taste and culture belong equal. The New Right government of Hungary did not accept this, and it led to a campaign in which the idea of «democracy», «nation», country» and «homeland» could be turned against one another. The government wanted to restructure the cultural community according to a (right wing) cultural value-system, and by doing so it suggested that whoever fails to agree with that, cannot be a member of the political community. It resulted in people, who did not believe in the «order-authority-homeland-work-discipline-family-will» type of value system communicated by the government, concerned. The government was offensive, because its members believed that the majority of the national political community was behind them, as well as identified with their system of values. They were wrong. With its voluntarism the cabinet alienated social groups who would have been easy to win over by a moderate center-right government.

The first Orbán government slowly turned out to be slightly anti-Western, anti-American anti-globalist and anti-liberal. It was a gradual and difficult move because, in the meantime, the government successfully negotiated Hungary's entry to the European Union and was already been a member of NATO since 1999. Negotiating with the EU had a moderating and restricting effect on internal politics in Hungary, which limited Orbán's room for manoeuvre. Fidesz, however, which used to be the member of the Liberal International, left the Liberals in Europe and joined the European People's Party party-family in 2000.

The Hungarian New Right was created by Viktor Orbán and his associates between 1998–2002. It proved to be an unsuccessful project politically but still remained very strong culturally. The Fidesz-MPP lost the parliamentary elections of 2002 and 2006. However, it emerged as *the only* powerful opposition force after 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. András Körösnéyi (2002), «Vezérdemokrácia és az antik orátorok (Leader democracy and ancient orators),» Máté Szabó, ed., *Demokrácia és politikatudomány a 21. században* (Democracy and political science in the 21<sup>st</sup> century). Budapest: Rejtjel, 54–76.

## 5. A rise against post-communist technocracy: Populism as a mix of nationalism and neoliberalism

Ten countries joined the European Union on May 1, 2004. Among them were the Visegrád countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary. On the day of the accession all three countries had a central-left government in power. Only a day later, Leszek Miller, the Polish premier was forced to resign. He was followed by the Czech social democrat Prime Minister, Vladimír Špidla, in June. In August, that very same summer, the head of the central-left government of Hungary, Péter Medgyessy, was also made to resign unexpectedly. The mission was accomplished and their leaders had to go.

Obviously, one can fail once the task is completed. It is after crossing the finish line that runners collapse. We have seen politicians fall in the high moment of glory, upon having achieved victory in war. Was it by accident that all three leaders were replaced by younger prime ministers, who all had a different outlook from their predecessors? Or could we find some regularity behind these changes of premiers that pointed beyond the personal character of these individuals?

Hungarians expected the following achievements from the new political elite and those in charge of the regime change: first, they wanted democracy, second, they wanted a market economy, third, they wanted a clearly demarcated political community and national identity, and fourth, they wanted their country to «join Europe». Each wish contained one implicit desire: the desire for prosperity. These societies experienced being locked behind the Iron Curtain against their will as the utmost injustice history did to them — as indeed it was. Hungarians found it «natural» to demand that their living standards were on level with those of the Austrians. Already at the time of changing regimes, Hungarians associated democracy with prosperity in their minds. The people wanted democracy, simply because they saw the wealth of the democratic countries. It seemed logical that those who have democracy prosper. The term «capitalism» was already viewed with disdain, but the phrase «well-functioning market economy» sounded convincing. It was generally perceived that a working market economy was needed in order to usher in prosperity. Redefining one's national identity and one's political community was important — especially in the newly emerged post-communist nation states —, because it had to be clearly defined who could take part in that prosperity as the legitimate member of the «sovereign people». Who belongs to the nation? Who could be a citizen of the country? It had to be defined in order to know how many slices the cake had to be cut into. Finally, the European and the Euro-Atlantic integration appeared in the target of siding with the strong and the successful.

The historical overview of Hungarian politics after the millennium shows, however, that for the political left to be in 2002 successful more was needed than remaining a simple «party of peace». The political right had recreated its identity, now it was the turn of the other side to do the same, although with a long delay. By 2004, when Central European countries joined the European Union, the old thinking of pleasing external expectations, the internally «value free», «neutral» and «expert» politics have failed in Hungary.

What happened in Hungary after 2004 was the connection of the region to the present concerns of the western world. The long transition was over; the new problems of the region were not simply «transitional» matters anymore. There are many types of capitalism, and several forms of democracy. By the decade of 2000s, it appeared that the opportunities of the sort of externally driven, follower, or «catching up from behind» type of technocratic politicking which gained its identity solely from external sources and which denied the autonomy and the social context, of politics, had been exhausted.

In 2004, Prime Minister Medgyessy was replaced by Ferenc Gyurcsány, a younger, more dynamic socialist politician whose rise was considered as the proper political answer of the Left to Orbán. Prime Minister Gyurcsány was able to keep the socialist-liberal coalition in power as a result of his successful electoral campaign of 2006. His personality proved to be not as far from the leader of Fidesz as the more reserved Medgyessy was — that is why Gyurcsány was able to beat his right wing opponents. From 2004 until the end of the decade, the sharp polarization of the country was symbolized by the increasing personalization of politics that centered around the two leaders: Orbán (Fidesz) and Gyurcsány (MSZP). After a few years in power, the socialist-liberal government, led by Gyurcsány, was widely judged as «josephinist» in its top-down, modernizationist reforms, and also too technocratic, alienated from people and corrupt. The sharp opposition of political camps resulted in open protest campaigns against the government in the Fall of 2006 which culminated in street battles between protesters and the police. Although Orbán lost two consecutive elections, he managed to achieve his long-term political goal: the social embeddedness of New Right, the extreme polarization of Hungarian politics<sup>26</sup>. Finally, partly as a result of the global economic crisis of 2008—9, Orbán was able to reintegrate the political center and to return to power with qualified majority in the new Parliament.

An era had come to an end, but the potential for populist politics survived. It featured first as a form of „post-accession depression» due to social divide, but later was followed by the revival of the New Right representing a marriage of nationalism and neoliberalism in the form of a new populist politics delivered by the returning Fidesz government from 2010 to the present. With all of its problems, Hungary after 1989 has been a success story in a worldwide comparison. But the success has been challenged in ways that are very much unexpected. From the happy story of the transition from dictatorship to democracy, there is a looming potential tragedy, a transition from democracy. From the summer of 2010, Hungarians have been witnessing something that they never expected.

Although the «negotiated revolution» of 1989 was largely elite driven, most people happily endorsed the new regime of freedom. They could travel, watch foreign movies, start their own enterprises and speak freely about their lives in public. Free elections and a representative government, a constitutional court, and democratic opposition were all firmly established. The last twenty years were far from being unproblematic, prime examples: a widening gap between the winners and losers of the regime change, between the living standards of the capital city, Budapest, and the rest of the country, and between the life chances of educated classes and the Roma population. But still, what we all experienced was liberal democracy. Governing parties lost elections. The media aggressively criticized politicians. Democracy was consolidated, and the country successfully joined the European Union.

But then there was the revolutionary victory of Fidesz at the polling booths in April 2010, and a reversal of the above developments in several instances. Many people could not believe their eyes: Is it possible to roll back history? Is it possible to take the oxygen of democracy away within a few weeks and months? Moreover: Is it possible to make a reverse transition, back to a semi-authoritarian regime within the European Union?

Although Fidesz received 53 per cent support from voters at the general elections, due to the oddities in the proportional electoral system, this translated into a two-third majority in Parliament. With such a super majority, the second Fidesz government was willing and able to change all fundamental laws, including the Constitution. Its leader, Prime Minister

<sup>26</sup> Despite two defeats of 2002 and 2006 Orbán still has a chance to return as Prime Minister in 2010 although he is increasingly criticized by members of his party.

Viktor Orbán, conceived of this victory as «revolution», declaring the need for fundamental political changes, purportedly as the «will of the people». Orbán even announced the installation of a new «System of National Collaboration» that sought to replace the „troubled decades» of liberal democracy of the past 20 years.

In general, there has been an attempted «constitutional coup d'état» of sorts, by a single person, Viktor Orbán. Government, which controlled public media (radio and television channels) did not give a chance for opposition figures to tell their opinion. Central propaganda machine transmitted messages of nationalism, Christian and patriarchal family values, with demands for law and order. In the meantime, the governing majority changed the Constitution nine times in the past half year already, which effectively destabilized legal security, responsiveness and accountability. On the top of that, in April 2011, the governing majority changed the Constitution which now named as Basic Law and it contains a long Preamble called the National Creed emphasizing Christian values, national history, plus unifying the nation as cultural and political community with state interests. Economic and social rights are fundamentally restricted, if not taken away from the employees. The country is not Republic of Hungary any longer, it is simply called Hungary. Only one sentence refers to the existence of the republic in the constitution. (If Orbán deletes that sentence from the text, a kingdom can easily be introduced.) The new President, Pál Schmitt is a former Olympic champion in fencing who has little or no idea about constitutionalism at all. Since he lacks any political autonomy, he can be removed by Orbán any time if he decides to leave his current position and to name himself as the next President. (Medvedev seems to have more autonomy vis-a-vis Putin in Russia than Schmitt has in his relation to Orbán).

The international press was in trouble to describe the new populist turn in Hungary. Orbán was often compared to such leaders as Putin (Russia), Lukashenka (Belarus), Kaczynski (Poland), Chávez (Venezuela), Meciar (Slovakia), Berlusconi (Italy), Kemal Atatürk (Turkey), De Gaulle (France), Tudjman (Croatia) and others. Some of these comparisons might seem to be tempting but most of them miss the point. Orbán is *not* like Putin or Lukashenka, because Hungarian authorities do not kill journalists, and do not jail, or force to exile, anti-government protesters. Despite the fact that both love European soccer, Orbán is *not* like Berlusconi as the latter had already owned several TV channels before he entered government while Orbán used his newly acquired government position to capture the media.

Kaczynski established the «Fourth Republic» in Poland but did not change the liberal economic policy of the country despite his nationalist rhetoric, and he failed very quickly due to the existence of a strong democratic alternative. Chávez nationalized certain industries and campaigned against foreign investors but he favored the lower classes in Venezuela while Orbán prefers promoting the upper middle classes and the national bourgeoisie with his economic nationalist rhetoric *and* neoliberal policies. De Gaulle established the «Fifth Republic» in France but did not much break the rule of law. Tudjman was an uncompromising nationalist leader, the self-elected founder of a «new Croatia», while Orbán is much more like an opportunistic populist who mixes leftist rhetoric and right-wing economic policies with nationalism — just as he is ready to mix traditional values with far right ideas. He pursues unorthodox policies like Meciar did in Slovakia, but he is more consistent in attacking democratic institutions.

The Turkish Kemal Atatürk re-established and modernized Turkey by Westernizing his country in several aspects (e.g. by separating state and religion) while Orbán sometimes gives the impression that he aims to «Easternize» Hungary along the Chinese way. He is not afraid to praise the effectivity of China's «market Leninist» communist capitalism while on visit in Asia, but by the same token, he equally encourages and utilizes anti-capitalist and anti-com-



munist sentiments at home. As a true political animal who is at home in populist politics, Orbán follows non-consistent policies: while aiming to reunite the nation with cultural nationalist arguments he redistributes the income of the state from the poor to the rich.

### Conclusions

As I tried to demonstrate above, populism can go easily both with democracy, semi-democracy and non-democracy. It is one of the most elusive concepts in the fields of history of ideas and political science. The recent Hungarian developments demonstrate that populism is even flexible enough to complement neoliberal policies.

Despite all efforts to the contrary, Hungary still has a multiparty system, though its democracy is increasingly non-competitive because of a rigging of the political and media systems. Freedom of the press is increasingly restricted to the blogosphere (Facebook and the like) and to opposition leaning journals — but it still exists. According to the most recent Freedom House index, Hungary is still a free country but dropped seven places within a year and it might slip down to the «partly free» category next year. There were free and fair elections in 2010, so the Fidesz-government enjoys a democratic «input legitimacy» (even if it has not been followed by a democratic «output legitimacy»). This is the stage of the «tyranny of the majority». There is a need for visible, prevalent and consistent democratic resistance to the authoritarian tendencies. Hungarian civil society, including employees, students, workers and others, are still not waking up from their long sleep. If Hungary survives this authoritarian, populist challenge with broad resistance, it is even possible that democracy may become stronger than it was before. The current Hungarian situation clearly demonstrates that democracy cannot be reduced to certain institutional frames, because those can be compromised. It can survive only if it is supported by committed active people.