

East European Constitutional Review

Volume 11 Number 3

Summer 2002

Focus: Election Roundup

Hungary's Social-Democratic Turn

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Looking at preelection polls, no one would have expected in the April 2002 Hungarian elections the victory of the left, led by the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP), and the defeat of the center-right group led by Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Party (Fidesz-HCP, also known simply as Fidesz). Hungary is again sailing in the wake of Poland, just as it had in 1994 and 1998. The political pendulum seems to swing to a similar beat in both countries.

HSP and the group led by Fidesz-which also included the Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF), the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and a Roma organization, Lungo Drom-fought an extremely harsh battle. In the first round on April 7, HSP gained 42 percent of the vote, overcoming the center-right alliance by a mere 1 percent. However, the composition of the new government came to depend on something more decisive than the contest between the major parties, namely, the performance of the smaller participants. The liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (AFD), with its 5.5 percent, barely crossed the 5 percent threshold for entry into parliament, while the 4.5 percent of the far-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party (HJLP) fell short. Although the second round saw the advance of the center-right alliance, led by Fidesz, in many constituencies in the countryside, this sufficed only to prevent an absolute HSP majority, thereby leaving the door open for a coalition majority of the left.

Thus a parliament of four parties was created, where the social-democratic HSP and liberal AFD occupy the seats on the left, while the conservative HDF and the so-called New Right Fidesz are across the aisle. A ratio of 198 to 188 parliamentary seats made it possible for HSP and AFD to form a government in May, with Peter Medgyessy as the prime minister.

The campaign

There are several reasons for thinking the 2002 parliamentary elections the most interesting and most memorable in the history of Hungarian democracy. Never before had there been so high a turnout (71 percent in the first round and 73 percent in the second). Never before had there been such strong polarization, nor had democratic Hungary ever seen such an emotionally charged, highly passionate race. Never had the governing parties conducted so biting and negative campaign, fearing defeat, and never had they been able to bring such a mass of people onto the streets between the two rounds. Certainly no leader of a defeated party had ever received the welcome Viktor Orban did, from the Fidesz supporters, after having lost elections. And never before had the two victorious parties been so close mentally and emotionally, in spite of their contrary origins: HSP, the legal successor of the former Communist Party, and the liberal AFD, one of parties that can be traced back to the underground opposition of communist times.

All public-opinion-polling firms-with the exception of one called Median-predicted a Fidesz victory-and they all turned out to be wrong. They were, however, not the only ones responsible for their errors. If people do not dare to share their opinions, who can blame the pollster? They only work with what people tell them. If people are afraid of the possible consequences of their thoughts, they keep such thoughts to themselves-that is why there are no public-opinion surveys in a dictatorship. This turns out to be the strongest criticism of the Orban government's four years in power: most anti-Fidesz voters simply did not dare to speak their minds. It is quite shocking to have such a situation under a democratic government.

The pollsters were totally baffled when they finally understood that, on election Sunday, masses of previously silent, covert socialist voters had suddenly appeared at the voting stations.

The classic campaign strategy of center-right parties dictates securing the radical-right votes first, then, with the approach of the elections, to make a gradual move toward the center. Most elections can only be won from the center of the spectrum. During its campaign, from the end of February, Fidesz moved closer and closer to the far right to attract HJLP voters, but it was too late. And by the end of March, the party had no time to return to the center; it became the prisoner of its own HJLP-like rhetoric. As a result, HSP was able to move into the vacuum at the center with its milder campaign, at the same time that the Center Party, an organization supposed to have no chance at all, was making some headway. So whatever Fidesz gained on the right it lost in the center of the political spectrum.

While Fidesz conducted a strong campaign and sought to deliver far-reaching symbolic messages, HSP chose a "soft" campaign to get closer to the moderate, centrist voters. That is why Peter Medgyessy promised to move forward with all the sensible measures of the Orban government but to stop the "witch-hunts." The Fidesz campaign outspokenly addressed itself to the young generations by drawing a symbolic dividing line between past and future; the HSP campaign directed its attention not only toward the active and vigorous people but also to the weak, the old, and the distressed. By doing so, the HSP deliberately stressed its soft counterarguments against Fidesz's hardline messages.

The alliance led by Fidesz came in first in the western region and several southeastern counties; HSP won in northern Hungary and Budapest. It proved fatal to Fidesz to underestimate the significance of Budapest, since HSP finally gained its marginal advantage not by the votes in the countryside but by virtue of its overwhelming victory in the capital: the left won in 28 out of 32 Budapest constituencies.

AFD gained the minimum number of votes necessary to enter parliament, thus stabilizing its position for the next four years. The campaigns of HSP and AFD seemed to divide the task facing them: HSP emphasized the positive messages of social peace and welfare transition, while AFD decided on an ironic, negative campaign, targeting government corruption. The tone of the AFD campaign was so different from that of the other parties that all liberal-minded but uncertain voters could easily identify its message. Furthermore, AFD had started its campaign very early, before the major parties hit the campaign trail, so the AFD presence had left its imprint on its sympathizers' minds long before Fidesz and HSP gained ground. There is, however, at least one crucial lesson AFD must learn from its 5.5 percent result: that this is probably the best one can hope to achieve by means of a negative campaign. No party is ever likely to go beyond this figure without producing some positive messages. The liberals' voter base has been decreasing since 1990 and is concentrated in Budapest and the big cities. Hungary's political system seems to be moving toward the bipolarity of left and right, and AFD has no choice but to make an increasing effort in the future to offer positive liberal alternatives.

Winning third place became unexpectedly significant to the fourth free elections. HSP came in first but needed AFD to form a government—as if the voters wanted to compensate AFD for its crushing defeat in 1998. Though smaller in number, the Free Democrats may obtain a greater share in governance than they had in the 1994-98 Horn government, where, although being the second biggest party in the country, they became a coalition "surplus."

The flip side of the coin, however, is that AFD has become confined within its own chosen limitations and has lost the power to polarize politics. As it turns out, AFD is going to be closely tied to HSP from now on. Moving to the right is no longer an option, because the regular voters of the party would never follow that course. There can be no more confusion over the identity of this pared-down AFD: it must now be acknowledged as a leftist liberal party.

The group led by Fidesz was not able to attract all the voters on the right, but they certainly sucked the life out of the far-right HJLP. Some of the best news of the 2002 elections is that the anti-EU and ultranationalist HJLP, which sometimes questions the very principles of constitutional democracy, did not get into the new parliament. Although HJLP has been able to keep its voter base since 1998, it was not

able to expand its numbers to the extent that the higher turnout required. The hundreds of thousands of newcomers, who boosted the turnout to over 70 percent, voted for either Fidesz or HSP; they were mobilized by the fierce struggle between the two major parties. This new situation left HJLP a loser.

It was not only the HJLP leader, Istvan Csurka, who had to say good-bye to his seat in parliament, but also the head of the Independent Smallholders' Party (ISP), the populist Jozsef Torgyan. The fall of this character, conspicuous in the politics of the twelve years since the transition, marked the last step in the disappearance from the Hungarian political scene of the "historical parties" present at the 1989-90 changes. The fact that the ISP scored under 1 percent, not even gaining the right to claim state support as a political organization, makes it very likely that this agrarian party will be banished into the history books forever. All friends of liberal democracy, all believers in the idea of the constitutional state, may rejoice: no extremist parties made their way into the Hungarian parliament. This turns out to be the greatest achievement of the 2002 elections. We have reason to hope that the next period can secure a peaceful public discourse, and that the center of political activity at last may move back into parliament from the streets. Additionally, the consensus in foreign policy can be restored, since this is the period when Hungary is going to join the European Union, fulfilling the dream of the democratic transition: the return to Europe.

What caused the change?

During the 1989-90 democratic transition, absolute priority was given to demonstrating the break with the old regime; that is why those days were dominated by politics heavy with symbolism that drew a sharp dividing line between past and present. The political elites and their followers spoke the language of morality politics. After that, the most important issue was the mitigation of crises caused by the vast economic changes, at which point political discourse became dominated by pragmatic debates on state finances, budget balances, and the reform of big distributive systems. With a politics symbols jettisoned, reform politics took over, manifesting itself in debates about how to handle the country's deep economic crisis and how to achieve successful transition in the economy. This culminated in a package of austerity measures targeting a fast transition to market economy.

But once a major change in an economic system is achieved, and the economy has gained new momentum, political discourse generally turns to and increasingly focuses on issues of distribution. This is just what occurred in Hungary when the political force that was elected in 1998 openly supported the middle classes, regarding them as the major driving force behind the economic and moral development of the nation. However, this force paid little attention to other social strata: the old, the uneducated, the marginalized, and the unemployed. What proved a novelty in this new situation (as compared with international trends in democratic consolidation) was the group's aspiration to divide society. In times of economic prosperity, it is quite unusual for a government to start its tenure with a program of carrying out something "more than a government change, but less than a change of [political] systems" and then to pursue it with an onslaught of intense pressure. Such an attitude makes one question whether the government is really devoted to consolidation politics based on national reunification.

There two types of politicians: dividers and uniters, and it depends on the historical circumstances when the time is ripe for one or the other. During periods of radical social change, priority is usually given to dividing policies that are based on a friend-or-enemy dichotomy, while in times of peace and consolidation the usual items on the agenda are unification and the maintenance of social peace. What was unusual about the activities of the 1998-2002 government was that it tried to consolidate the country while openly aiming at division. The dichotomies (us vs. them, patriots vs. quislings, nationalists vs. antinationalists), well-known from the symbolic political discourse of the 1990-94 HDF regime, made their reappearance at a time when the overall aim should have been democratic consolidation. The tension that was created by the clash between the revived symbolic politics and the consolidation tasks of the government undercut the sincerity of the government's actual commitment to democratic consolidation. Is it possible to consolidate by using the rhetoric of "a second revolution"? More and more analysts voiced their suspicion that the government was indeed performing a deconsolidation. The government's position was that a complete transition required the complete change of the elite; the overheated rhetoric of "more than a government change" referred to this radical program. This was a war agenda for the new,

generation-based elite, and, at the same time, it promised a remedy to the frustrated losers of the transition. While the government failed to realize its large-scale social reform, it wrapped its redistributionist policy in the guise of a symbolic political discourse to make the political practice of "something more" than an elite change, but "less than" a reform socially legitimate.

The Orban government did succeed in replacing the elite, but it had a further agenda: the cultural division of the country. The advantage to be gained from this was the reintegration of the right shattered in 1994 and thus avoiding the fate of the fragmented right in Poland. By challenging the principles, practices, and institutions of the 1989 constitutional consensus, the Orban government defined its own social basis, creating thereby two parallel Hungarys—a battlefield of two strong, rival political cultures. This symbolic political discourse, which had been made into a strategy, also concealed the creation of a covert party elite jeopardizing consolidation and embroiled in a struggle with a public watchful of the former's political activities and defensive of its own constitutional rights. Voices raised in defense of constitutional procedures were not judged on the merit of their concern for the public but on the basis of their political affiliations.

In spite of its defeat, the Hungarian right is not going to follow its Polish counterpart down the path of disintegration. The Polish right's "social coalition" contains, first of all, those people and groups successfully bought off by Fidesz: the party built up its client base very meticulously. Another layer of the Hungarian right is held together by anticommunism; the Orban government succeeded in dividing society to the extent that some people thought anyone not voting for Fidesz was voting for the communist past. There is a third, somewhat overlapping layer—that of the religious. In Hungary, most believe that those who are religious are voting for right-wing forces. By addressing these three groups, Fidesz was able to forge a coalition of originally very heterogeneous elements. Fidesz's more moderate leaders won over the conservatives in the center, while the other end of the coalition could safely count on the votes of the less-educated people in smaller communities, most of whom were losers of the transition and could be attracted to radical rhetoric.

But, still, the coalition might not have come into being without a certain feeling of want, an unquenchable desire for a strong, efficient, protective state. The democratic transition resulted in a weak state, and people feared that no social institution was there to protect and defend them. Society became saturated with the fear that along with the turmoil in the world, the state thought to stand for the public's welfare was also disintegrating and falling prey to different interest groups. Sensing this overwhelming and reasonable demand, Fidesz took care to meet it. It was right in thinking that there is no democracy without a state. But they were slow to realize that this state must be constitutional. Instead of turning the state into the means of creating public welfare, Fidesz "made the state its home" and monopolized it. Since the state became a servant of one interest group during the Fidesz governance—the party itself—the rhetoric of the "strong state" reinforced nepotism. The dividing line between privatization and nationalization soon diminished.

Most of the society sensed the attitude of Fidesz leaders to be one of "If the communists were allowed to steal, so are we." But if that is the case, what is the difference between their "new civic Hungary" and the country under communist rule? Using the state as a tool for this strange egalitarian policy, Fidesz dismantled the liberal and constitutional characteristics of the state and the idea of equal rights for all. As a result, the system seemed to lose its democratic mandate, and an emerging view of politics was reinforced, namely, that the idea of a liberal, constitutional state and parliamentary democracy is a mere façade, while behind the scenes Fidesz, like the socialists before them, will use its power to grow rich. This created a real danger, because the loss of people's belief in the possibility of sustaining a democratic constitutional state might very well have resulted in its collapse. We could say that the real significance of the result of the 2002 elections lies in the rejection of this line of thinking and of its potential consequences.

Some lessons

It is a basic characteristic of democratic consolidation that democracy must enjoy deep and wide legitimacy among both elite groups and within the society as a whole. Everything depends on the creation

and ongoing spread of a democratic political culture. In this sort of political milieu, people in power do not seek to go beyond the democratic and constitutional boundaries for the realization of their interests, and this same rule-of-thumb applies to legal and administrative proceedings, to institutions as well as in everyday political practice.

Democratic consolidation may be studied at the level of elites, organizations, or citizens. Consolidation takes place among the elites when politicians, opinion leaders, prominent figures of culture and business, and the heads of other similar groups not only submit to democracy passively but are also deeply convinced that it is the best possible form of governance and that the constitutional system that secures it deserves their active support. Political leaders, too, acknowledge each other's constitutional right to engage in a peaceful contest for power, but they are also well aware of the fact that law and all regulations must be observed, and thus they do not encourage their supporters to violate mutually respected constitutional norms of political behavior. The same applies for the norms governing all the major parties, interest groups, and movements. On the level of the citizen, we can speak of consolidation if more than 70 percent of the population basically shares the belief that democracy is the best possible form of governance, not just in theory but in practice, and for their country in particular. Moreover, there should be no antidemocratic party or movement that enjoys significant support, and the country's citizenry, as a whole, rejects the idea of using force, fraud, and illegal or anticonstitutional means to enforce political preferences at the elections. In all these senses, Hungary has achieved democratic consolidation.

Yet, there remains more to democracy than free elections: a lot depends on how the freely elected government behaves, namely, on the way in which it exercises its authority between two elections. Does the governing party realize that it is in its own interest to adhere to constitutional rules, which might benefit at a time when it is in the opposition? Will long-term goals outweigh short-term tactical interests, which too often manifest themselves in periodically curtailing the rights of the opposition? The driving force in society, over and beyond one's own immediate interests, should be the normative conviction of democratic principles. However, in corrupt oligarchic regimes, built on or controlled by an "inner party" or a mafia-like network (in other words, regimes where corruption is rife and state prosecutors and intelligence agencies are regularly used to cover up political games), there is a tendency to institutionalize informal, illegal, and anticonstitutional practices behind the mask of constitutional democracy. If the political and business elites hold up the latter—that is, the mere appearance of democracy—as an example, people may be inclined to follow this pattern. Then they start to identify democracy with a majority, to equate a nation with an ethnic group, and a constitutional state with "the right of the strong." The shallower and more exclusive a system is, the more its representatives feel that they are not accountable to the voters, and the more difficult it is to make acceptable the ostensible "democracy" to social groups in the lower strata of social hierarchy, since they will feel that corruption is a basic characteristic and not just a passing side effect of the system. This was not the case in Hungary in the past four years but, as many voters felt, politics was well on the way in that direction.

The new social-democratic government has to prove, above all, that it wants to avoid these practices and traps. The extremely aggressive campaign divided the country, so the first task of the new government will be the reunification of society and putting an end to the "cold civil war." Still, this might not necessarily eliminate certain basic dividing lines in Hungarian society. The twentieth century saw the country suffering from the traumas of world wars and dictatorships coming on each other's heels, decades of the lack of freedom, and the shock of a democracy that found most people unprepared for the inevitable injustices of capitalism; no wonder people have an excess of pain, frustration, and grievances. This democracy is not a welfare democracy yet. The twelve years that have passed since the transition are next to nothing from a historical perspective, but they include not just the transformation of the political system but the shock of privatization as well. Processes that have taken decades in other countries have been concluded in Hungary practically overnight. The Hungarians' answer to communism was the tactics of survival and shiftiness—to the new capitalism, complete with aggression and appropriation. These are all egotistic, individualistic answers. We seem to be living not among murderers—as the rhetoric of the radical right suggested—but in the world of shysters and petty kings, who render the exploited and the poor almost invisible. It is if the price you pay for getting rich and making your way up were the loss of honor and the rejection of solidarity.

One underlying goal of democratic consolidation is social peace, a healing of wounds, and a policy of common prosperity spreading to a greater segment of the population. Such a policy would encourage a diversity of identities belonging to different groups of the population 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—that is why the idea of "permanent revolution" is alien to it.

The basic problem with the 1998-2002 coalition government of Fidesz, ISP, and HDF, led by Orbán, was that its attempts at democratic consolidation constituted a post-transition "second revolution." But can you consolidate by increasing the tension among social divisions, or by reducing them to one dimension, namely, the extremist dichotomy of "friend or foe"? In 1998, Orbán might have thought he had no time to lose in rearranging power structures. The program of "more than government change" was an effort to modernize the right, build a "Fidesz-Hungary," and help a new political culture, client base, and social support to take root. He might have thought that democracy and the public welfare were going to profit more from a contest between two oligarchies than from the domination of one of them; the upshot was he tried to organize an economic and social basis for the Kulturkampf between the two Hungaries existing in his mind. Instead of pursuing social reforms, he regarded a complete change of the elite as his main task, along with securing key positions for his people, construction of a new support base, and the irrevocable creation of an institutional background for Fidesz-Hungary. However, his mistake of identifying the political community with the cultural community (even though the latter notion was only with reference to the right) inevitably 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.

Orbán's policy of social mobilization resulted in a redrawing of the political map, as had occurred in Argentina of the forties and fifties under President Perón, and in Tudjman's Croatia or Meciar's Slovakia as well; all these places saw a face-off of autocratic democracy and liberal democracy. The same can be observed in today's Italy, too, where the former power of multiple parties has disappeared and the only frontline of political struggle lies between pro-Berlusconi and anti-Berlusconi people. The last two weeks of the Hungarian election campaign saw the fierce and emotionally overheated fight of the pro-Orbán and anti-Orbán political coalitions. The "cold civil war" took the shape of a hot campaign.

This is what can be called populist policy: when a democratic process is represented as a choice between life and death, truth and lie, past and future, or good and evil. Populism also entails a redefinition of the role of state by emphasizing its dispensational paternalistic character. Other traits include a kind of economic nationalism; a moralistic rhetoric constantly referring to nation and justice; a steady process of searching out and stigmatizing the "enemies of the nation" ("traitors to the nation," "communists," Big Business, financial oligarchy, cosmopolitan intellectuals, and so on); and the polarization and reduction of political pluralism to a single dimension. During the past few years political competition was not centered around different programs and rationally debatable arguments but was reduced to a passionate and symbolically mediated metapolitical war of "us vs. them," justified with "cultural" reasons. National symbols (the flag, the circle ribbon, the anthem) that represent the unity of the nation were appropriated by Fidesz and its supporters, thus stressing the idea of division; "Go Hungary!" like "Forza Italia!" became a slogan of the party. The community of national politics was identified with the circle of Fidesz supporters, and they were called on to "defend of the nation." Populist politics does not need intellectuals but propagandists.

One of the most important components of populist politics is a technique for personifying power. This is reinforced by the media, by a culture of commercials and videoclips and the process of overall commercialization of the past few decades. 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 becomes more important than conscious understanding and acceptance-and that feeling is, perhaps, most accessible through those charismatic personalities who communicate the party's message. Instead of a confrontation of political programs we witness clashes of symbols, tokens of belief, and religious or quasi-religious convictions. The personalities conveying the message can become the message. That is how a political leader might become the old-fashioned boss of a charismatic community (which bears much resemblance to a religious congregation), and why the young in search of an identity turn to his politics for deep emotional experience. In a Führerdemokratie ("boss democracy"), the symbolically redolent opiate of power conveys to the faithful the opiates of an abandonment to and a belonging to a community.

One of the biggest surprises regarding the 1998-2002 period was that a significant element of Hungarian society-people living in small communities more so than those in the cities-needed this kind of boss democracy. They were relieved to have someone to tell them what they needed to do in a chaotic, irrational, rotten, and decadent world full of enemies and bad faith-and to do so in a clear, simple, unambiguous, yet knowledgeable manner. In spite of all this, however, the elections have proved that most voters do not believe in populist propaganda: they are interested in the present rather than in the past, and they are willing to believe in the future, but only if they can sense its foundations in their present, in other words, in their everyday lives.

As for Viktor Orban, he saw a tragedy in his own defeat; he could find no connection between the governance of the past four years and the defeat of Fidesz. Even as a loser in the elections he tried to divert the public's attention from the mistakes of his government. The leaders of Fidesz were neither able nor willing to face the fact that at times of economic prosperity only governments that had blundered greatly lose elections. Ultimately, we might say that the fall of the Orban government was due to its attempts to wed fire and water, in other words, revolutionary-populist politics and democratic consolidation. It is a sign of the maturity of Hungarian democracy that voters considered not only personalities but the defense of Hungarian democratic institutions as well.

The new prime minister, Peter Medgyessy, has often voiced his wish to end the Kulturkampf between the "two Hungarys," and return to parliamentarism and a democracy of greater consensus. Social peace might be further secured if women were to play a greater role in politics. For the first time ever, there is a female president of the parliament and a female home secretary; furthermore, the largest parliamentary faction is also headed by a woman. HSP seems to be taking seriously the idea, already current in Western Europe, of gender equality as a prerequisite for modern democracy. This is important both for social harmony and for the example it sets society, and that is why it must be reflected in the composition of the political elite.

Peter Medgyessy intends to form a government representative of the "national center," one reminiscent of Gerhard Schroeder's "new center" in that it promises better relations with the churches, the development of health care and provincial infrastructure, a new policy of intellectual life, and better care of the poor. It promises a renewal, a change of perspective, and a break with the Orban kind of populism as well as with the technocratic orientation of the Horn government. Nonpartisan, he hopes to rise above the inner conflicts of the governing parties and to stay free of the influences of the HSP power groups. It is understood that none of this will be easy, and that the realization of these values and goals will emerge only slowly. The reform communists of the 1980s and the so-called socialist managers of the 1994-98 Horn government still hold key positions in the new governing elite's ranks. But difficulties aside, the goals are worthier than those to which we have been treated of late.

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