

CIVIL SOCIETY AND POPULISM IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

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"On Szabadság Square, don't take it for showing off, somehow I just wasn't afraid. To tell you the truth, I even mocked the folks who were jeering at me.

– Why are you shouting now? Where were you in March '88?

– Then, too, I was here, he said.

– So what do you want?, I said. So was I.

– That I know well, he said, now much more quietly, and we looked at each other, as two human beings.

I was discovering more and more familiar faces around me, faces from old demonstrations. Not only among the SZDSZ members, who wanted to defend me, although it didn't occur to me in the least that I was in danger, but also among the opponents, those who were scolding me. Whose work is this, that we hate each other so?"

Ferenc Köszeg, at the demonstration in front of the Hungarian Television buildings on 15 March, 1992¹

Since 1974, democratic systems have replaced authoritarian regimes in more than 30 countries in various regions of the world. This wave of global "democratic revolution" has swept across Southern Europe, Latin America and East Asia, eventually reaching Eastern Europe by the end of the Eighties as well.²

The Eastern European countries' transition to democracy as they became free from Soviet occupation raises a number of questions, the specific combination of which is not characteristic of other regions, or at least not in this way. Among these problems, our paper tackles questions belonging to the sphere of inquiry concerning civil society and populism.

One of the peculiarities of the Eastern European democratic transitions was that oppositional groups organizing against Soviet supported party states stepped onto the stage with a civil society program. The concept of civil society has at least three different meanings: it can be used at once as a comprehensive name for concrete social movements, circles, and associations, as a category of social theory, and as a political program. Polish oppositionists during the second half of the 1970s adapted the political, philosophical concept of civil society, which had been evolving for a long time, to Eastern European circumstances. Also through their mediation, the concept arrived in Hungary and the other Eastern European countries.³ With the help of this re-interpreted concept, and having drawn a lesson from the defeated uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the

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oppositionist intelligentsia of occupied Eastern European countries who wished to pursue neither the road of armed revolution nor that of radical reforms directed from the top of the party were able to elaborate a new strategy for democratization.

The essence of the strategy of civil society was to induce social-political organization in wide circles that, nevertheless, did not seek open confrontation with the Communist Party. While in society, politics, culture and the economy, they intended to expand the roles open to organizations independent of the Party State, they left the power monopoly of the Party State intact, and did not put the seizure of power on the agenda for a reasonable span of time. Instead, they aimed at the establishment of independent organizations, of professional and religious groups free from the control of the Party State. They stressed free organization, and the articulation and representation of interests. A crucial element of the strategy of civil society was the creation of a free critical public, devoid of censorship, and the establishment of independent networks of publishing and distribution. In short, instead of a frontal clash with the Party State, this strategy – which could be summarized by the slogan "society against the State" – promoted a slow clearing process, the erosion of the power structure, and the building of a parallel society. At the same time, it suggested conscious self-limitation and keeping the process within the boundaries. This strategy, in a nutshell, fostered democratic oppositions in the region, including the Polish Solidarity trade union, which remained all the while one of the main catalysts of change in Eastern Europe.

After the close of an important phase of political transition and the formal establishment of democratic multipartism, there are today new dangers threatening Eastern European democracies. In several countries in the region, presidential systems have been introduced which, compared to parliamentary systems, usually prove more inclined/sensitive to anti-democratic tendencies.⁴ Nationalist endeavors have re-emerged, in some countries generating armed conflicts, and even long-lasting local wars. That the peoples of this multi-national region are divided by mutual prejudice which receives constant nourishment from grievances suffered by suppressed national minorities only adds fuel to the fire. Grave economic hardships, galloping inflation rates – in some countries hyper-inflation – and unemployment exceeding that of Western countries, only add to all this. National and social tensions are being exploited by the new populist movements in each country. Naturally, these factors are seriously endangering the stability of the democracies in the making.

Has the strategy of civil society a message and a viable political legacy for the present situation? What happened to civil society during the democratic transition and the process of shifting over to multipartism, and what is happening afterwards, in the new institutional environment of parliamentary democracy?

How is it that masses of people, mobilized at demonstrations in the interests of democratic and civil society objectives, were demobilized by the parties in the newly established elite democracies, and where did this

demobilization lead? What were the consequences of the emergence of an elite democracy organized within the upper regions of society, and of the fact that parties were losing their organic contacts with civil society?

What is the relationship between the conceptual frameworks of civil society and populism? In general, and also in the East European transitions discussed in isolation, where do these two traditions, these different spheres of thought, meet? What does the notion "the people" mean for civil society and for the current populism?

And finally, is a long-term, stable democracy possible in the considerably poor Eastern European countries? Who and by what means – and for what objectives – will endeavor to re-mobilize those groups of society that do not think the changes brought about any tangible results for them, and that feel they were excluded from the political and economic distributions? What are the real dangers the temptation of populism threatens to bring about in a region where the transitions have not only been followed by an ethnic Renaissance, but also by the re-birth of acute nationalisms?

The following article will attempt to provide schematic answers to these questions, mainly in the light of the example of Hungary.

The Heritage of Civil Societies Today

Among other ways, democratic transitions are distinguished from revolutions in that not only do mass movements or mobilizations emerge in them, but at the same time, the conscious limitation of these movements, and even the demobilization of society, surfaces in them as well.⁵ In the course of successful democratic transitions, both the former-elite and the social movements behave in a *self-limiting* way in order to achieve their goals without spilling blood.⁶ This self-limitation is based on a respect for rights – more precisely, in contrast to laws and decrees issued by a dictatorial system, on a respect for human rights – already acknowledged in the West, but still only contained in an "invisible constitution" in the Eastern European transition.⁷ The respect for this "invisible constitution" of legality on the part of the opponents of an authoritarian system requires such a great degree of awareness that such conscious self-discipline only spreads over wide strata of society at exceptional historical moments. A democratic transition may lead to a long-term stable democracy only if the self-limiting feature of the transformation becomes a *collective experience* in society.⁸

Revolutions, due to their dramatic scenario, remain preserved ineradicably in the collective memory of whole generations. It is not a chance coincidence that the transition appears to be most successful precisely in those countries where the experience of previously defeated revolutions was preserved in the social conscience. Eastern Europe, before seemingly homogeneous, has been split into two parts regarding the relative successes of the political and economic transitions: East Central Europe in a narrower sense, and South Eastern Europe, i.e., the Balkans, have become separate from each other. In Hungary – aside from the numerous deeply rooted reasons for the social development and recent political circumstances – transition could take place

peacefully because, after the 1956 tragedy, the prevention of violence proved to be a value proper not only to the new political elite, but also to a wide strata of society. The situation was similar in Poland in 1989 and in Czechoslovakia. Elsewhere, however – as in Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania, or Yugoslavia – where communism had been established by national forces or in a system constituting a multinational state, not only were the memories of revolutionary uprisings and a heritage of defection missing, but so too was a civil society capable of self-limitation. In these countries, the political turn has been continually occurring in a tension menacing with violence or in the shadow of conflicts manifesting themselves as anti-communist rebellions, civil wars, or ethnic clashes.⁹

Mobilization and Self-Limitation: Paradoxes of the Transition

The paradox of democratic transition resides in the fact that even if it is successful and society gets rid of the *ancien regime*, it is rather exceptional that the process of transformation is able to provide wide strata of society with a possibility for historic action. The transition is successful when, at the decisive moment, society demonstrates its force but does not actually take recourse to it. The role of society in democratic transition is vital, nevertheless it is primarily symbolic. There is a need to elevate collective actions that liberate people from fear and "purge" the "condemned" past, such as the burial of Imre Nagy,¹⁰ but there is no need for constant mass political mobilization. In a transition, the ritual evocation of the memory of revolution is necessary, but a revolution itself is not. As a consequence, the main political problem of transition consists in the fact that while society eliminates dictatorship, it cannot experience the moment of *rupture*. In this respect, it is the East German and Czechoslovak transition that most approached revolution because, on the historical stages of the Berlin Alexanderplatz and the Prague Wenceslas Square, the masses had the opportunity to experience a feeling of collective identity created by the "velvet" revolution.¹¹

The great questions of transition are *political* questions revolving around issues of *power*. For the East and Central European theoreticians of civil society, this concept supplied a suitable category for the realization of a program of free communication between autonomous and disparate units (*zarvany*) of society over and against the existing power structure.¹² Thus, the concept of civil society in the region was inseparably combined – in a complementary way – with the concepts of State and power. It was not a program to seize power, but to *eliminate it*. The East European conception of civil society did not, however, contain plans in case its program, due partly to external factors, were to be realized, and the old elite were really to be excluded from power. The validated anti-authoritarian notion of civil society fell into a crisis during the *power vacuum* that came about at a determinate phase of the transition. No sooner did Gorbachov, having recognized the loss of the high-tech arms race, and consequently that of the Cold War, withdraw his support from the East European regimes, than the systems in the region

which previously seemed unchangeable collapsed like castles of cards. There was no longer anything to be ousted: *power had to be assumed*. The concept of civil society as applied to power – in a paradoxical way – fell into a crisis precisely at the moment of its accomplishment and strategic victory.

Civil Society and Elite Democracy: The Hungarian Example

Strikingly, it is not even the year 1989, but rather 1988, that Andrew Arató, a profound analyst of questions regarding Eastern European civil societies, posits as the decisive year of the Hungarian transition.¹³ By this time, the “era of circles” had fully flourished: various unions, social organizations, networks, and movements, the civil platforms of *social politics*, were mushrooming.¹⁴ By the end of 1988, however, in most civil social organizations, differences between the advocates of two divergent conceptions had come to light.

To put it sharply: 1. The proponents of one theory continued to insist on the anti-authoritarian strategy of *civil politics*, and argued for a slow maturation process and the postponement of party formation, and for the specifically East European topicality and preservation of organizational forms serving as protective umbrellas, such as networks and forums; 2. The promoters of the other conception, on the other hand, took the position that a political force can only be opposed by another political force, and that the Party State regime could only be replaced by a new governmental form based on democratic elections. For this reason, instead of civil movements, it was rather *professional political parties* that were the more necessary.

The dilemma of “party or movement” triggered heated debates at the foundation and during the initial period of each significant party’s activities. (Compare, e.g., the circumstances of the foundation of the SZDSZ, after which the earlier “Network of Free Initiatives,” organizing on the grounds of civil social principles, also persisted for a short while. The conflict of “movement” vs “professionalism” also emerged in the Fidesz and the MDF. In June 1990, at the third conference of the Fidesz, after several conflicts, its movement wing fiercely attacked its elite in Parliament. The March 1989 national assembly of the MDF attempted to dissolve the tensions by declaring the MDF to be *both* a party and a movement.)

There was consensus between the two trends that a change of systems was indeed necessary, but while one group emphasized the re-politicization and self-management of society and the elimination of the existing power, the other one had already shifted the stress to *replacing it*. The events of 1989 validated the latter conception. A process of quick party building was launched, and by the time of the June to September national round-tables discussing the peaceful rendering of power, a layer of new political leaders had appeared. This comprised a counter-elite that was able to agree not only to a change of systems, but also on a scenario for the shift of power.¹⁵ Thus, by 1989, *political society* was organized out of one part of civil society and the new political *elite* emerged from this through inner selection. The “grassroots” conception of democracy related to civil society was replaced by

an *elite democratic* conception, described by Schumpeter, that narrows democracy down to competing elites and periodical elections. The heavy burden of the Hungarian change of systems is that the scissor-blades resplit between society and the new political elite exactly when society – through free elections – could have finally liberated itself from an oppressive and dictatorial system.

Strangely, for the “*power shifting*” political set emerging out of civil society, it was precisely a separation from society that could promise possible access to political success: to them political efficiency and the principles of continuous, mass social participation seemed incompatible with each other. They identified their own political action with professionalism, and social action with amateurism. The “*anti-authoritarian*” groups coming out of the civil society of the Eighties, however, also fostered disappointed people who felt they “had been robbed” of the change of systems, that in reality, victory was betrayal, the denial of the original program of civil society. Some of them doubted that what had happened really had, and they not only regarded the new system with criticism, but also questioned whether there had been a change of systems at all. Others once again abandoned politics and returned disillusioned to their professions and private lives. They picked up where they had left off before the decomposition of the Kádár regime: their skepticism bittered into a rejection of the entire new system. In their minds, some groups of civil society, by “lagging behind” and “going astray,” were getting closer to groups which during the whole process of the change of systems had behaved passively but which now, because of the deterioration of their standards of living, were reacting with growing dissatisfaction and complaint, and which on several occasions were becoming supporters of politicians promoting populist programs.¹⁶

The following question arises: Why did it happen in this way? Out of the two trends described up until now in a polarized way, why did groups advocating views favoring the change of systems and elite democracy become the leaders of opinion within the newly organized parties, and eventually, at the decisive stage of the transition, during the round table debates, the directors of the oppositionist strategy?

As a theoretical answer, the inescapability of pluralist democracy and the establishment of a multi-party parliamentary system presents itself. Churchill’s idea conveys an indubitable truth, and need not only be applied as a tautological slogan: democracy is a bad system, but nothing better has yet been invented. The need to create a multi-party system and the demand for a political society born out of civil society were not only the logical continuation of the range of thought about civil society; they at the same time supplied an adequate reply and a tangible political program for opportunities deriving from a regional and geo-political situation subject to stormy transformation.

From the participants’ point of view, most of the leaders of the democratic opposition recognized the need to build parties quickly, which called for political resolution and courage. They were backed up in this, besides by their intellectual and political capital, also by their international recognition.

The transformation of the MDF, due to the relatively smaller predominance of these factors, generally speaking, took place more slowly along with the change in its top politicians. The public background of the founders of Fidesz was provided by political experience gained in the "college movement": several of them became financially independent thanks to foundational support. We should cite as a further factor effecting party building that the historical parties opposed to the new organizations that were struggling with these dilemmas were *ab ovo* set up with the objective of party-type functioning; thus, they were able to avoid the problems which stemmed from abandoning a civil society orientation.

As the power-shifting groups came to the foreground, the democratic opposition's radical and anti-authoritarian groups – activists endorsing values of Western civil society rooted in the spirit of ecological, feminist, and new left ideas, as well as the left-wing populists of the nationalist camp – were left out of the mainstream of social change. Nonetheless the question came up: How could the masses that through the program of civil society had originally been mobilized – at the demonstrations against the building of Bös-Nagymaros dam and the destruction of Transylvanian villages, and at the independent marches on 15 March and 1 May – but that by then were certainly already energized for the change of systems be demobilized?

Although the democratic parties which emerged out of civil society needed the active support of society during the transitional period, afterwards, due to the demobilizing aspect of the transition, they had to discharge those "revolutionary" tendencies. Nevertheless, along with the realization of a program of peaceful transition, the demobilization of society, except for the campaign of the "four yeses" in autumn 1989, turned out only "too well." The newly established parties also played a role since the greater part of society could not experience the moment of "revolutionary" split.

This led, on the one hand, to the fact that the system of democratic institutions could only take root in the "murky regions" of society; that is what the rates of electoral participation, unusually low by European standards, refer to. On the other hand, it also had the effect that groups excluded from decisions orientated themselves not towards a democratic validation of interests, but towards the idea of a "newly initiated revolution."¹⁷

The fact that the rapid political change of systems took place in the framework of a much slower change in the economy further contributed to this. The laws concerning transformation ruled by the Németh government made possible an obscure, even scandalous "spontaneous privatization" and preservation of State property. This gave parts of the former economic nomenclature an opportunity to turn its originally political power into economic capital. This spontaneous privatization, which raised moral dilemmas and in many cases suggested corruption, in a context of increasing inflation and unemployment, contributed to the perception among wide social strata of being excluded from the political and economic shift of power happening "above," and of not having their interests represented by any parties.¹⁸

The outcome of all of this was that even efforts identifying themselves as democratic were increasingly colored by populist tendencies. The ideological and political dimension of "left-wing vs right-wing," which anyway poses difficulties for analysis, was more and more replaced by the social dimension of "those who are above and those who are below." In autumn 1990, during the days of the taxi drivers' blockade, we could already encounter the blending of civil rights and populist elements over the course of the exploding protest. The blockade could almost be designated as a movement of civil disobedience on moral grounds ("the government had lied"). At the same time, however, at some points it was also a desperate economic protest and a strike, prompting the hunger strikes to which the MDF, by organizing a counter demonstration in favor of the government party, endeavoured to supply a populist answer.¹⁹

The Changes of Form of Populism

Ellen Comisso, Steven Dubb and Judy McTigue, pointing to South European and Latin American examples, argued in an essay that the greater social participation in Eastern Europe is not an obstacle to successful democratic transition, but rather a condition of it.²⁰ It is thanks to this that the conditions for the institutionalized articulation of interests are created, without which democracy cannot function for long. Pointing to the social participation which in general promoted democratization, the authors conclude that it is an illusion to talk about populism in this region, since this danger is not threatening to emerge. According to them, the rhythm of economic and political transition could primarily be slowed down by *elites* with counter interests.

We agree with Comisso and his collaborators' main idea since we see one of the main reasons for the fragility of the new democracies in the deepening cleavage of communication between the political establishment and society. However, from the statement that social participation does not usually lead to populism, we do not, unlike them, draw the conclusion that democratic transitions cannot be threatened by it. In the countries of the East European periphery or semi-periphery populism never arose as a movement from below – as did populist initiatives appearing in the American Midwest at the end of the 19th century – but rather was a protest directed by parts of the elite from above.

In Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, it was not so much a populist protest by the masses that one had to fear as that, in the period of "political hangover" following the radical change, some power groups, playing the "populist card," referring to the "people's" dissatisfaction, would try to overcome other politically elite groups. A general trait of East European populist politics is that, more often than not, it uses *national* and *social* rhetorics at the same time. The countries freeing themselves from Soviet oppression found their own identities not only in democracy but also in their ethnic revival which, despite the attraction of European integration, is able to reinforce tendencies of non-commitment and introversion. The national-populist

rhetoric can be coupled with anti-West feelings, homophobia and anti-capitalism which, in a period of increasing unemployment and a painful economic transition, can be conveniently completed with social demagogic demands for "fair" central distribution. Populist politicians can easily argue that the economic misery of post-communist countries is caused by the restrictive economic and financial politics dictated by the IMF and the World Bank, against which a "fair" distribution of the riches and burdens and a central rejuvenation of the economy are necessary. Hence populism in under-developed East European countries, despite its name, in reality *does not serve the mobilization of civilians into activism, but the reinforcement of the role of the State*. In this situation a "centralizing spiral"²¹ can easily get intensified both in politics and in the economy and may lead, not to the autonomous separation of a market model and social sub-models, but to the formation of "clans"²² and a clients' bourgeoisie, and, further, to a new intertwining of economy and politics. According to whether the increase in state power happens prevalently in the name of national or social promises, we can talk about dominantly right wing or dominantly left wing populisms. These, however, usually melt into each other, since the allusion to the prevailing interests of the whole people belongs to the essence of populism. This always renders populist programs fluid, obscure, and difficult to outline.²³

This paper is not meant to provide a comprehensive presentation of theories of populism. Populism, anyway, belongs to those ideas that are most difficult to define and that in certain historical situations, regions, and societies have emerged in ever changing forms. An approach to populism is also complex, because under this title we can at once speak about political style, ideology, and movements; these can emerge either together or one by one.

Populism has had a range of meanings during various historical periods in the United States, Latin-America, Russia and East Central Europe. According to the given region, period and political situation, it can refer to a need for direct democracy; a paternalist, "friend of the people" but still authoritarian political style; a kind of peasant-movement ideology; an agrarian radicalism; a political technique applicable in any regime; the radical pre-socialist movements (Narodnism) with a base in the intelligentsia—the list could go on and on. Here are some of the possible definitions: According to Andrzej Walick, populism is "one kind of socialism that appears in under developed rural countries as a counter effect to the challenge of modernization."²⁴ Peter Worsley posits that populism is "basically the ideology of rural agrarian communities that feel threatened by the spreading industrial and financial capital."²⁵ Peter Calvert argues that it is "mainly such a rural movement that tries to preserve traditional values in a changing society."²⁶ Harry Lazer maintains that "behind populism there is a deep anguish that the opinion of the majority is being directed by an elitist minority."²⁷ Peter Wiles claims that "it is a syndrome, not a doctrine: it is a supposition that virtue and moral purity inhabit simple people and their collective traditions." Edward Shils considers "populism a belief that the will

of the people is superior to any other social norm."²⁹ In Torcuato di Tella's definition, populism "is a political movement that at once enjoys the mass support of city workers and country farmers, but it cuts across class borders and does not originate in the autonomous, organized power of either class".³⁰ Following Margaret Canovan, we can talk about agrarian populism and political populism, although this approach has been disputed by several authors. In the first case, the populist movement possesses a determinate social and economic character, like the People's Party of American farmers in the 19th century, Eastern European peasant movements, or the agrarian socialism of the Russian intelligentsia. Nonetheless, there are some exceptions here, too, for Peronism in Argentina was definitely a movement led by urban circles, mainly workers and anti-capitalist persons of modest means. It is among political populisms that Canovan mentions direct democracy based on referenda and mass participation, such as populist dictatorships, reactionary, racist populisms, or politicians' attempts at building broad political coalitions which appeal to people as a unit.³¹

Is democratic populism possible? Some evaluate the American farmers' protest movement as a form of political neurosis directed against the plutocracy and aristocracy of the East Coast by minority groups that identified themselves as "the people."³² Others, however, refer to it as a beautiful example of "grassroots democracy," as a return to the classical Jacksonian, Jeffersonian traditions, and to the American radical and anti-state legacy.³³

In Hungary in the initial period of the transition the MDF overtly promoted the left wing democratic populist program of "society building," the creation of an "entrepreneurs' and farmers'" Hungary, and the economic policy of the "third way." In underdeveloped countries, however, populisms on the whole have strengthened the State super power, or, even when they preserved their anti-state position, have pursued an anti-democratic direction. Hence we criticize Comisso and his colleagues' excellent essay on two points. 1. In their approach, they regard the American tradition of democratic populism as exemplary, and that is what they project onto other regions. 2. As a consequence, they overlook the role played by the political elite in the incitement to populism. The extent to which Eastern European populist politicians influence the societies also depends on the given economic and social situation and the political culture of the country. Nonetheless, during the shift to a market economy, precisely because of the strong globalization and dependence on the West, we do not wish either to over or to underestimate the chances for a Eastern European populist politics.³⁴ At the same time, in the following section we must reflect on possible interpretations of the Eastern European concept of populism, for the debate itself originates to a great degree from the varying contents and distinctive usages of this notion according to regions.³⁵

Ethnos and Demos: Populism in Eastern Europe

Comisso and his colleagues supplied a precise description of the main

dimension dividing the Eastern European party system: its poles are not primarily construed by the modern concepts of left-wing and right-wing positions, but by the categories of *gemeinschaft vs gesellschaft* as defined by Tönnies.³⁶ According to this distinction, in post-communist societies the values of the *gemeinschaft* ("community") are represented by those parties that relate to the ideologies of the regimes existing *before* the communist regimes. That is where they search for their origins, and draw legitimation for their decisions. For parties advocating *gesellschaft* ("social") values, the main reference is not the national heritage of the pre-communist past, but the contemporary practice of Western democracies. In the Hungarian party system, the first group is mainly represented by the so-called "historical" parties (FKGP, KDNP), while the second group is chiefly embodied by such parties as the SZDSZ and the FIDESZ, which grew out of the civil movements of the Eighties. The MDF is an aggregated party (*gyüktöpart*) from this point of view. Promoters of both conceptions can be found among its ranks, although since autumn 1991 the radical "populist-nationalist," right-wing trend of the party has become considerably stronger.

Essentially the same pair of values, applied not to party systems but to major tendencies of political transformation, was defined by Ulrich Preuss when he stated that in the constitutional process of post-communist systems, the conflict and struggle of *ethnos* and *demos* could be observed.³⁷ The democratic liberation and the reappropriation of national sovereignty took place at the same time, and this led to new sources of political conflict. Some groups of society experienced freedom primarily in the new democracy and the legal institutions related to citizenship, while others located it mainly in the national and ethnic rebirth. Both these large groups found their own political representation, and thus the divergences of the principles of *ethnos* and *demos* became perceptible not only in a metaphorical sense, but also in the current of daily political struggles.³⁸

The differences between *ethnos* and *demos*, or between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* not only can be interpreted statically, as a dimension dividing the party system and social profile of a country, but also dynamically, as concepts describing various phases of the transition. Alexander Movschuk, a Ukrainian economist, depicted the transition taking place in the Ukraine as one in which the democratic principle dominated at the beginning, but after the reclaiming of national independence, the ethnic component became increasingly dominant. In his opinion, this component will remain fundamental up until the fragile democracy's institutional system becomes stable, at which point, in his view, the democratic element can once more prevail. Movschuk illustrated his explanation with a diagram and extrapolated its validity to the other post-communist transitions as well.³⁹ The chart between the axes of nation and democracy shows the shifts in direction and the political dynamics of a transition in progress.

The Dynamics of Transition

Until the free elections and the foundation of the new system, the democratic

principle of civil rights was prevalent. After the reacquisition of national sovereignty, which in Hungary meant the departure of the Soviet troops, the ethnic component came to the foreground. It became evident that democratization at the first stage would happen within a national framework, and this gave an impetus to nationalistic tendencies. According to Movschuk, it is only after the redefinition of national identity that the return to a trend of democratic values is again possible. This curve can provide an interpretative frame for us to understand why the civil rights spirit of 1989 was pushed to the background and why liberalism, seemingly on the way to victory in 1988–89, fell into a crisis.⁴ During 1991–92, the liberal-socialist intellectual elite of the former Solidarity was pushed to the background in Poland. In Czech-Slovakia, the *Civil Forum* split in two, the *Publicity Against Violence* broke up, and the former opponents of *Charta 77* were eliminated from power. The successors of previous communist parties and the nationalist-socialist parties became more powerful.

The indicators of this process can also be traced in Hungary: since the change of systems, several types of populisms have emerged. A distinctive characteristic of Eastern European, and also Hungarian, populisms is that in them the classical plebeian, anti-elite attitude of "you above, us below" is intertwined and blurred through the binarism of *ethnos vs demos*. Hence, in this approach, the *populus*, the people, *at once* means the wide anti-elite strata of "below" that provide for the same elite, and the *ethnos*, the national community and safeguard of ethnic-popular continuity. One of the roots of Eastern European populism derives from the Herderian Romantic vision of the people⁴¹ (in this it differs from populisms of other regions), and the multiple variations of this vision appear in many forms in the intellectual tradition. Accordingly, it is an intellectual tradition, promoting ideas that do not stem from the *populus* but from certain intellectual groups, partly elites, that has elaborated and rendered these ideas politically topical over and over again.

Populisms surfacing in Hungary have several traits in common: we can find in each of them a reference to the people as an unstructured, organic whole;⁴² to social demands and promises without any concretely elaborated economic programs; and, with a few exceptions, to a demand for "a real change of systems" and "a newly started revolution."

These populisms, however, can also be distinguished from each other. On the one hand, they can be classified according to their emphasis on either the plebeian or the ethnic component of *populus*: "we down here" or "we Hungarians," "the Hungarian people." Another point of comparison might be what target community they wish to mobilize in practice (despite their constant identification of their community with the interests of the "people as a whole").

The formation of various populisms can be explained by a number of factors. The key momentum of the electoral victory won by the MDF was the *ethnos based* appeal to Hungarian society. Today, two years after the change of systems, the populist radicals of the MDF, whose popularity is diminishing, intend to encourage the *mobilization of their supporters through*

an *ethos-type* re-appeal to the people, and thus a repopularized representation of its unity.⁴³ The populism of certain independent members of parliament is characterized by complete anti-elitism, the mythologizing of the "people," while that of others is characterized by vehement anticommunism stemming from the impulse of an "unfinished revolution."⁴⁴ This latter one is upheld by associations of 1956 veterans, which during the change of systems did not represent a considerable force, but since then have been organized, and now, through their criticism of the new Hungarian elite democracy, are reviving the rhetoric of revolutionary popular demands. These groups are at the same time in contact both with organizations fitting into the tradition of the classical right wing and with the radical opposition that crumbled away from the democratic opposition during the change of systems.⁴⁵ In addition to all of these, the demagogic agrarian populism and blaring anti-communism of the Small Holders' Party represent another feature.⁴⁶

The populist field is, at the same time, divided by the right-wing and left-wing political axes: a movement of patriotic left-wing populism, soon to become a party, and also a left-wing trade union populism have emerged.⁴⁷

The trends mentioned above, in spite of their frequent overlap, or even mixture, differ from each other on the level of daily politics in their relationship to the coalitionist government; and theoretically, they differ according to whether they stress the plebeian or the *ethnos* element of the "people." They also diverge in the degree of vehemence of their nationalism; also, certain populisms are homophobic, others are not.

What they all share is that each views its objective as the remobilization of the masses that were demobilized after the change of systems and disappointed by the democratic parties.⁴⁸ Although the attempts at remobilization are organized according to different interests, we can find a common point not only in their populist ideologies, but also in their political demands. This common point, however explicit or otherwise, is the need to reinforce the role played by the *state*. Agrarian populism seeks increased state intervention, market protection, and subsidization of products. The radicals of 1956 demand new laws and a calling into account by the state. The populism of the MDF, among other things, aims at governmental control and even management of the media. The trade union version protests the decrease of state redistribution.

Here let us return to the beginning of our study, to the question of the relationship between the program of civil society before the change of systems and the populism after it. Our assumption is that it is the disorganization reigning in civil society that gives leeway to the appearance and intensification of populism. The weaker and less organized a civil society is, the more space it opens up to populist initiatives. The weaker the agrarian, worker, and employee organizations that crystallize out of civil society, the more populist elites have a chance to achieve mass support. The less the formal mechanism of consensus of interests works, which presumes the existence of strong, independent trade unions and branch interest associations, the more space there remains for populist mobilizing

experiments. The weaker the civil social roots of the parties articulated in elite democracy become, the less the threat of populism remains a mere illusion.

There seems to be a commonality between the strategies of civil society and populism: It seems that both turn directly to the population with mobilizing intentions; one did so before the transition, the other one afterwards. Behind this apparent likeness, however, there are precisely opposite tendencies. While civil movements always attend to their starting point, *society* itself, populism looks to the *state*: it is an ideology intending to augment state power, or actually trying to seize it. In the first case, it is itself the movement, activity, and organization of civil society; in the second, the "people," the masses mobilized for party or other elitist interests, merely constitute a point of reference.

The Eastern European breakthrough of populist tendencies during 1991–92 was accompanied by a thinning out of the liberal center. Parallel to this in Hungary, the SZDSZ, growing out of the former democratic opposition, went through a grave crisis in the winter of 1991–92. In the new situation, the party-founding groups evolving out of civil society in the Eighties were compelled to reflect about whether political efficiency, despite the slackening of a live relationship to society, could be sustained. In Hungary the recognition of this doubt led in the autumn of 1991 to the foundation of the *Democratic Charta*, a civil initiative, as a kind of *demos* experiment.⁴⁹ The people who issued the *Charta* declared that they did not consider the process of the democratic transition accomplished, and they advanced solidarity among citizens for the sake of safeguarding democratic ideals.

The *Charta* opened a way towards the elaboration of a new civil social strategy grounded in the institution of citizenship. This strategy is founded on a respect for constitutional rights, a demand for democratic rights, and, through the representation of these values, it organizes direct civil actions. This program was later completed by the *Social Charta*, which set out and vindicated basic minimal civil social values. To the *Social Charta*, for the first time since the change of systems, all the Hungarian trade unions have agreed.

Today it is still hard to discern whether the *Charta* is only an indicator of crisis, or a way out of it. Is it an opportunity for politicians coming from the intelligentsia to find their way back to their own roles, or for civil society to find its way back to politics? It can be regarded as party politicians' self-criticism – those who were formerly representatives of civil movements – or even as their role confusion because of their apparent or actual place in the new political elite. But perhaps it might also suggest that the strategy of democratization based on critical publicity and civil society did not lose its validity after the change of systems – nor in the Nineties.

Translated from the Hungarian by Agnes Hochberg

NOTES

1. *Beszélő* (28 March 1992). The demonstration, organized by 1956 veterans' associations and by extreme right groups, took place in front of the Hungarian Television buildings. The demonstrators demanded a "Christian" and "national" media. The crowd committed violent acts against the liberal politicians present as well as against journalists.
2. For an overview of the process of global democratization, see Samuel P. Huntington, "How Countries Democratize," *Political Science Quarterly* 106:4 (Winter, 1991–92): 579–616; and Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly* 99:2 (Summer, 1984): 193–218; also, Laurence Whitehead, "The International Dimension of Democratization: A Survey of Alternatives," Manuscript of a paper delivered at the XVth World Congress of the International Political Science Association.
3. About the history of the concept, see Krishan Kumar, "Civil társadalom – egy fogalom újraértelmezése," *Mozgó Világ* 17 (1992): 4–19. Among literature about aspects of civil society in Poland, the classic work by Andrew Arató is outstanding: "Civil Society Against the State: Poland 1980–81," *Telos* 47 (Spring, 1981): 23–47.
4. About the relative weaknesses of the presidential system, see Juan J. Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy* 1:1 (Winter, 1990): 51–69.
5. We use the concept of transition here to mean a revolutionary alternative, as one of us described in a previous study: András Bozóki, "A magyar átmenet összehasonlító nézőpontból," *Valóság* 8 (1991): 16–33. For a rich presentation of possible interpretations of revolution see, e.g., Michael S. Kimmel, *Revolution. A Sociological Interpretation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 1–14.
6. Cf. Jadwiga Staniszkis Poland, "Self Limiting Revolution" and Arató, "Civil Society," esp. pp 27–43.
7. The oppositional strategy based on human rights has been elaborated by Kuron and Michnik in Poland, and later the same theory appeared in the Czech *Charta 77* civil rights movement. The leading theoretician of the Hungarian opposition elaborated in a separate book the philosophical facets of the problem: Cf. János Kis, *Vannak-e emberi jogaink?* (Paris: Magyar Füzetek Könyvei, 1986).
8. In a paper on political anthropology, Tamás Hófer applied this approach. Cf. T. Hófer, "Harc a rendszerváltásért szimbolikus mezőben. 1989. március 15-e Budapesten," *Politikatudományi Szemle* 1 (1992): 29–51.
9. The fact that in the territory of Hungary delineated by the Trianon borders there are no national minorities living in a quantity comparable to the Southern European countries largely contributed to the avoidance of this scenario. A more spectacular comparison may be offered by the [former] Czech and Slovak Republics, the loosening up and separation process of which, at this writing, has been happening in an entirely different way than the Yugoslav armed conflicts – i.e., in a State legislated, constitutional way.
10. Rév István emphasized the significance of the burial of Imre Nagy from this point of view in his prominent lecture delivered in the winter camp of the Rajk László College on 26 January 1992.
11. Cf. Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern. The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (New York: Random House, 1999).
12. In the Hungarian oppositionist circle, in the debate conducted in the columns of the *samisdat Beszélő*, János Kis regarded political opposition, and Mihály Vajda the creation of critical publicity, to be the objective of the intelligentsia that "thinks differently." J. Kis, "Gondolatok a Közélejtővöről," *Beszélő* 3 (1982), reprinted in *Beszélő Complete Publication Vol 1* (Budapest: AB-Beszélő Kiadó, 1992), 115–122; and M. Vajda, "Ellenzék vagy kritikai nyilvánosság?" *Beszélő* 8 (1983) and reprinted in *Ibid*, 456–459.
13. Cf. e.g., Andrew Arató & Jean Cohen, "Civil társadalom és demokratikus átmenet Latin-Amerikában és Kelet-Európában," *Mozgó Világ* 7 (1992); and Andrew Arató, "Civil társadalom a kialakuló demokráciákban: Lengyelország és Magyarország," *Politikatudományi Szemle* 2 (1992).
14. About the phase of civil social organizations till 1987, see András Bozóki, "Kritikai

- magatartásmoდელlek a fiatal értelmiség körében," *Iffjúsági Szemle* 3 (1987); and Sükösd Miklós, "A nyolcvanas évek nemzedékének szociológiájához," in *Határ IV* (1987).
15. Cf. Anna Richter, ed., *Ellenzéki Kerekasztal. (portrévázlatok)* (Budapest: Otlet Kft., 1990); András Bozóki, "Ut a rendszerváltáshoz: az Ellenzéki Kerekasztal," *Mozgó Világ* 8 (1990): 23–37; András Bozóki, "Democracy across the Negotiating Table," *New Hungarian Quarterly* 33 (Spring, 1992): 59–70; Erzsébet Szalai, "Szereppróba," *Valóság* 12 (1990); László Bruszt, "1989: Magyarország tárgyalásos forradalma" in Sándor Kurán, ed., *Magyarország Politikai Évkönyve* (Budapest: Aula Omikk., 1990), 160–166; Rudolf L Tökés, "Hungary's New Political Elites: Adaptation and Change, 1989–1990" in György Szoboszlai, ed., *Democracy and Political Transformation. Theories and East-Central European Realities* (Budapest: Hungarian Political Science Association, 1991), 226–286.
 16. Among those "lagging behind," we can mention, for example, Jenő Nagy and his circle, certain editors of the *samisdat Demokrata*. Nagy Jenő's article attacking the former democratic opposition lists a whole series of populist stereotypes. Jenő Nagy, "Magyar? Demokratikus? Ellenzék? Az ördöggel üzni ki a sátánt?" in Bozóki, Csapody, Csizmadia, and Sükösd, eds., *Csendes? Forradalom? Volt? II* (Budapest: T-Twins Konferencia Füzetek, 1992), 16–189. Zoltán Zsille "analyzes" the new régime in a similar tone, cf., "Ne engedjünk az 56-ból!" in Vera Gáthy, ed., *Leltár* (Budapest: MTA Társadalmi Konfliktusok Kutató Központja, 1992), 129–133; "Javított kádárizmus. Reklamáció az elmaradt rendszerváltás miatt," *Magyar Narancs* (4 April 1991): 4; and "Reklamáció az elmaradt rendszerváltás ügyében" in Bozóki, Csapody, Csizmadia & Sükösd, eds., *Csendes?*, 197–202. On the recent Christian and nationalist turn of *Demokrata*, see articles by András Balczó and Gyula Fekete in *Demokrata* 3 (1992). The criticism of the régime offered by György Krassó, who formerly belonged to this radical democratic circle, was also sharp, and, as regards its form and rhetoric was similar, but its contents had more of an anarchist character, and less of a populist one. See György Krassó, "Statárium és happening," (Bozóki András interjúja) *Mozgó Világ* 1 (1990): 63–76.
 17. In November 1990, for example, an ephemeral initiative called *Polgári Mozgalom a Köztársaságért* [Civil Movement for the Republic] was founded, one of the main projects of which was "Let's start the change of systems anew!" The organizers of this initiative wanted to win Imre Pozsgay for leadership, but Pozsgay did not even attend the founding session, so the "movement" died in its seeds.
 18. Cf. for details Miklós Sükösd, "Ki beszél itt forradalomról? Az átmentés mint erkölcsi probléma" in Bozóki, Csapody, Csizmadia & Sükösd, eds., *Csendes*, 95–101.
 19. Cf. for details András Bozóki and Éva Kovács, "A politikai pártok megnyilvánulásai a sajtóban a taxisblokáde idején," *Szociológiai Szemle* (1991): 109–126.
 20. Ellen Comisso, Steven Dubb & Judy McTigue, "A populizmus illúziója Latin-Amerikában és Kelet-Európában," *Mozgó Világ*, 59.
 21. The expression "centralizing spiral" comes from Erzsébet Szalai, who, in her recent writings, has on several occasions analyzed the new approach to economic and political power during the coalition government led by the MDF. See Erzsébet Szalai, "Perpetuum mobile. Nagyvállalatok az államszocializmus után," *Valóság* 4 (1992): 1–25; Szalai, "Az újratermelődő erő," *Népszabadság* (23 May, 1992); Szalai, "Ki nyer holnap?" *Magyar Hírlap* (23 June, 1992).
 22. On the scenario of "clan building," see David Stark, "Hungary from Plan to Market or from Plan to Clan?" *East European Politics and Societies*. János Böröcz presented a similar theory in an early article: see József Böröcz, "A kádárizmustól a parlagi kapitalizmusig: a fejlett informális építésének időszertü kérdései," in *Mozgó Világ* 8 (1990): 61–66.
 23. On this, see for more details András Bozóki, "Az MDF alakváltozásai," *Magyar Narancs* (18 December, 1991).
 24. Andrzej Walicki, "To Define Populism," *Government and Opposition* (Spring, 1968): 158.
 25. Peter Worsley, *The Third World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967), 167.
 26. Walicki, quoting Peter Calvert. In Walicki, "To Define Populism," 163.
 27. Harry Lazer, "British Populism: The Labour Party and the Common Market Parliamentary Debate," *Political Science Quarterly* 91:2 (1976): 259.

28. Peter Wiles, "A Syndrome Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses of Populism," in Chfta Ionesco & Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), 166.
29. Edward A. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy* (London: William Heinemann, 1956), 98.
30. Torcuato di Tella, "Populism and Reform in Latin America" in C. Veliz, ed., *Obstacles to Change in Latin America* (London & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 47.
31. Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (Harcourt: Brace & Jovanovich, 1981), 12–13.
32. See, for instance, Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Random House, 1955).
33. See, for instance, Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (Oxford, London & New York, 1978).
34. Such populists as the Polish Timinsky and the Hungarian Torgyán are fairly isolated. Today it cannot yet be judged what politics Meciar, the prime minister of Slovakia and the leader of a natural-socialist party, is going to adhere to. The Russian Yeltsin and the Serbian Vuk Draskovic, on the other hand, who became candidates as charismatic populist politicians, were rather pushed in the opposite direction, which we may designate as more liberal.
35. The phenomenon is not unknown in the social sciences, we only refer to the different French and German traditions of the concept of modernity and modernism, and to the misunderstandings of the debate around postmodernism originating from this. Cf. Zsolt Nagy, "Posztmodernizmus," *Mozgó Világ* 7 (1991): 81. The problematics of populism, however, constitutes only one of the problems of definition and methodology generated by the Eastern European democratic transitions. See a survey of these in Valeric Bunce, "Analyzing the Transitions: Constraints on Empirical Research," Manuscript, Department of Government, Cornell University.
36. See the theoretical explanation of these concepts in Ferdinand Tönnies, *Közösség és társadalom* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1983).
37. Ulrich Preuss, "Constitutional Powermaking for the New Polity. Some Deliberations on the Relations between Constituent Power and the Constitution," paper delivered at the conference on "Comparative Constitutionalism," organized by Yeshiva University's Cardozo School of Law, 13–14 October, 1991.
38. In Hungary this appeared, to a certain extent, in a way which could be misunderstood, in the revival of the popular vs urban division, with which not only were earlier cultural traditions raised to a political level, but also the Jewish question and antisemitism, which had already saturated this dualism for a long time. In the parliamentary electoral campaign of the MDF in 1990 the image of the enemy as "communist, Jewish, liberal, and non-national" became a leading motif. See for instance the manifesto "Fathers and Sons" published between the two electoral rounds in the *Magyar Fórum*, a bi-weekly edited by István Csurka. Csurka, a co-founder of the MDF at Lakitelek, was subsequently elected vice-president of the party.
39. Alexander Movtschuk, "Political Transformation in Ukraine," (1991), Manuscript.
40. See for instance David Ost, "The Crisis of Liberalism in Poland," *Telos* 89 (1991): 85–94.
41. "On Populism: Now suddenly the monsters of winter tales come alive." "A Conversation with Sándor Radnóti," interview by Ágnes Széchenyi in *Kritika* 6 (1992): 6.
42. "Populism attributes a uniform character to people. It regards 'the people' as an individual . . . This individual called people, this metaphor gets embodied, more precisely it searches for opportunities for embodiment, those who can *personalize it*. Those, who can speak not in their own name, but in that of the represented people." Ibid.
43. See for this István Csurka's way from "Új magyar önépítés," (Püspöki-Magyar Fórum, 1991) to his editorials in *Magyar Fórum*.
44. See the comments by Ágnes G Maczó and János Dénes, in e.g., "Népi maximum. Beszélgetés Maczó Ágnessel" (Interview by András Bozóki) in *Magyar Narancs* (13 June, 1991).
45. Cf., e.g., the demonstrations organized jointly by the '56 National Association and the National Association under the aegis of Romhányi, at the Radio buildings on 23 October, 1991, and at the Television on 15 March, 1992. At the latter one, the "Pofosz" was also present. A sign indicating the above-mentioned process is that the members and supporters of

the Hungarian October Party, founded by Krassó, also collaborate with 56-er organizations related to the extreme right. A telling moment was when, at the demonstration in Corvin köz on 23 October, 1991, Mária Wittner was cheering Krassó from the stage, and the crowd responded with frozen silence and hissing.

46. For an analysis of the history of the FKGP after 1988 see Miklós Sükösd, "Why History Does Not Repeat Itself? The Saga of the Smallholders' Party," *East European Reporter* 5:4 (1992).

47. Marked by the names of Imre Pozsgay and Zoltán Bíró, and the MSZOSZ, in conflict with the concurrence of independent trade unions, the Hungarian Democratic Association, shows various signs of left-wing populism.

48. As far as we know, in Hungary there have been no sociological studies about the social composition of the participants of the 1988–89 mass demonstrations. Lacking precise data, we can only suppose that among them many took part in subsequent manifestations of people's dissatisfaction, e.g., in the taxi-drivers' blockade, and/or later at the demonstrations of 23 October and 15 March, which were overtaken by populist and extreme right domination. (See, for instance, Ferenc Köszeg's report quoted in the epigram.)

49. The *Democratic Charta* was issued in Budapest in September 1991, and it became a movement on 7 December 1991. The *Social Charta* was published on 1 May 1992.