Julia Lakatos

A populist era or something else?

The invitation of the Hungarian prime minister to Washington DC by president-elect Donald Trump is a significant political victory for Viktor Orbán, whose relations with the United States have been strained during the Obama-administration. While the country's commitment to NATO and its special missions have never been questioned, the politics of the governing party Fidesz had often resulted in critique from the State Department. Thus for a long time, the prime minister was not a welcome guest in the White House; the ice seems to have broken with Donald Trump however. Not by accident though, as the Hungarian prime minister was the first of the European leaders to endorse the Republican candidate long before it seemed like he would win the elections.

For many, this coalition of leaders who have ascended to power on an anti-elite platform seems to be the sign of a new era. We have now stepped into the populist times, according to them. While this may sound alarming, we propose to see this conglomeration of parties in light of its historical predecessors. This joining of forces may seem as something radically new, however it falls in line with the trends of the past quarter of a century. During this time we have seen two transatlantic coalitions form along ideological lines, and both have been primarily a product of the special relationship between the U.S. and Great Britain. That of the likeminded approach of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher during the Cold War era and that of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in the late nineties. The greatest difference between them is that with Reagan and Thatcher it seemed it was the two against the Soviet worldview whereas the age of the new-left heralded by Clinton and Blair was not so isolated. At the time it seemed that the whole of Europe was jumping on the bandwagon as European elections were consistently won by parties of the progressive left. It looked like the stars had aligned in a way that it was possible to make widespread social change. A decade and a half later all this seems to have evaporated into thin air, and a new transatlantic populist coalition appears to be forming, reaching as far as Russia.

While the rise of the new-left had been a rejection of the Cold War-era conservative ideological dominance, the turn of today is answer to the overly ambitious new-left, which has also been stamped with the cattle-brand of neoliberalism. The changes have happened slowly, as following the financial crisis stability and reliability were more important than change.
Nevertheless as it could be seen with the rise of anti-elite movements (Occupy, Tea Party etc.) the sentiments have been there all along. The change of guard came for two reasons therefore; one was that seemingly there had been consolidation, the other is that despite this stabilization, the ruling elite have been indifferent and unresponsive to the mushrooming protest movements.

To sum up, let us look at why these changing trends are important. Historically Hungary has tried to be on the victorious side of conflicts. Nevertheless it always seemed that it had picked the wrong allies. The wish to be on the winning side of history is deeply vested in Hungarian society and has always driven leading politicians. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the change of regime, it was thought that by adopting a free market and democratic institutions and accession to first NATO, and then the EU, Hungary was finally on the right side of history. With the eventual crisis of this “new” system however the hard gained victory had seemed less and less favorable. This time around though instead of following the pack, Hungary aimed to lead it, which is very different from what was historically expected of the country by international partners.

In this sense Viktor Orbán has definitely been one of the earliest respondents to the changing global sentiments. The fact that at the time of the election of the Orbán government it had the greatest parliamentary majority of the European Union not only gave it unprecedented voice, its outspoken approach also made it a poster child both for the supporters as well as the condemners of this way of doing politics. The political events of this year have brought new allies to Fidesz’s political approach however. Orbán is no longer alone against the world. And though in the beginning we argued that the phenomenon of the mushrooming of anti-elite parties is nothing new, it does raise the question of whether the term populism is still the adequate word to describe it? If populist rhetoric is the new norm when it comes to winning elections, then perhaps it is time to rethink the boundaries of the term. And not just because the more widespread such a way of governance becomes, the more domesticated, or mainstream it becomes. The new coalition will have its moment, but like those before it, will eventually run its course. While it may currently be the so-called era of populism we must always realize that the signs of the times are constantly changing. While we do not expect a sudden rise in the prominence of Hungary in relation to the United States as a result of Donald Trump’s invitation, we do see it is an example of the fact that the tides are turning in global politics, which will mean a more supportive political environment for Hungary.