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The Next Hungary

How could the Hungarian impasse be resolved?

At the beginning of 2014, Centre for Fair Political Analysis published an extensive analysis about the governing party of Hungary, Fidesz. The Director and Senior Analyst of the think tank also analyze Fidesz and the Hungarian government in a book titled *Orbanism: Beyond Prejudices and Enthusiasm* which will be published in London at Social Affairs Unite, and available shortly in bookstores. Preparing these essays was a great intellectual challenge for us, and I think Fidesz is not just a challenge for Hungarian analysts; it is difficult to understand for foreign readers as well. Why is Fidesz the way it is? Why does Viktor Orbán want an illiberal state? How long can the Hungarian governing party retain its great majority in parliament? Last but not least, how long will Hungary’s “tug of war” with Europe continue?

Naturally, these are all questions which inevitably interest the part of the international public that pays attention to – and is uncomprehending about a good portion of – Hungarian politics. Nevertheless, in this piece of writing, I target different questions than those raised above, as for the most part, the aforementioned texts have already answered them. I raise a topic no less significant, and this is the question of what solutions exist in the mid-term to the problems Hungary faces.

My recently published e-book bears the title; *The Next Hungary. Political Cooperation, Grand Coalition and Social Cohesion*. This is a long analysis from which I would like to highlight just a few thoughts.

The first question right away, is the interpretation of the title: why do we have to think about „The Next Hungary” in Hungary? I have to make it clear that it is not necessarily for the same reasons that the left and right-wing parties think so. It is not enough to say what the Hungarian opposition has been saying for months, that the prime minister should be removed; much more, or rather, something else is necessary. We have to think about the Next Hungary because I believe that the current government will eventually fail and the opposition will most
probably not be in a state fit to govern. The way I see it, the two camps facing each other must come to an agreement in the future.

The revival of political cooperation is the first step in the renewal of Hungarian political culture. Viktor Orbán said in vain on March 15th, the national holiday of Hungary, that the peoples of the world (and mainly Americans) learned democracy in the 19th century from Lajos Kossuth, the leader of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution. It is possible that Abraham Lincoln listened to one of the meetings in which Kossuth, who was forced into emigration, spoke of the universal values of democracy. It is indisputable that in Gettysburg, Lincoln formulated the blessings of democracy for eternity.

Even if Kossuth would have wanted democracy in Hungary, neither him, nor his successors could achieve this – till 1989-90. Not to mention the Western tradition that we call political cooperation. If Hungarian analysts want to be truthful, they have to admit that we cannot find examples for this in Hungarian tradition, all the more for its opposite. In 1989-90, and the decade that followed, the Western European helpers of democratization and Hungarians as well, thought that we had found the philosopher’s stone, and that the introduction of democracy would give us the experience of political cooperation. The institutions of a liberal democracy were introduced and the two sides of the political elite competed with one another in a fairly moderate way. Nevertheless, we, who are watching from Hungary, could see already from the second part of the 90’s that the cooperation that came to be until that point would not be enough in the long run and that the institutions of liberal democracy were not strong enough. By 2015, we can establish that the ideals of the change of regime have failed; moreover the Hungary of today is a very different one, than what the Western readers could size up at the time.

I do not necessarily write this sad and resigned, but taking into account the realities. If it is true that the culture of cooperation is a very weak tradition in Hungary, then none other can come of this than that sooner or later the struggle between the two major parties or blocks will exacerbate again. Even the Hungarian public doesn’t necessarily understand this, not to mention those that are looking at us from the outside.

For the onlookers the equation seems fairly simple: Viktor Orbán and his party are the ones that derailed Hungary from the path of democracy. In the essays mentioned above we
have argued against this simplification as well. On the surface, yes, it is true that Viktor Orbán has transformed the face of post regime-change Hungary significantly; however he could not derail Hungary from the path of democracy because actually, we had hardly stepped on it. I would like to emphasize that if the premise of liberal democracy is the cooperation of the elites (and I think it is) then even after the change of regime this condition was not sufficiently present.

The crisis which has evolved since then comes from the constant weakness of liberal democracy. It is the reason why – as far as people could see – relatively few benefits came from emerging from the Soviet block and entering into the European Union. Hungary did not become a welfare state, the citizens did not become aware of their rights and are not willing to raise their voices for freedom despite the fact that these are the cornerstones of a liberal democracy. Neither the governments of the liberal-left side, nor those of Viktor Orbán brought Hungary closer to reaching this.

The current Hungarian opposition is hardly present in the parliament and even with the civil participants of the street movements that have become well known Europe-wide, their significance is slight. Nevertheless a situation may arise where the Orbán-government fails in 2018 (or even before that time). The state of the opposition however is far from being capable of governing; if this failure comes about, it will be owing to the international opinion, namely to the European and American resentment that surrounds the Orbán-government.

Nevertheless, it matters a lot what happens after, in the event of a failure of government. In my view, Fidesz (if it remains in power) cannot handle the problem that arises from the international isolation on its own. The current opposition however cannot give an answer to what has to be done with the society that elected the Hungarian right in 2014 three times in a row with a great majority.

A grand coalition could be the adequate solution to governing the „Next Hungary”. I don’t have to tell a foreign audience how effective such governing can be. This has not been tried in Hungary either before 1990 or ever since. Let us imagine a country which has generally always been governed by the same parties, while the others were in opposition. There was no way for them to learn how to govern together. Many European countries could
experience the advantages of grand coalition governing, (though often out of necessity). In many places there still exist such governments. Hungarian politics fights against this solution. In Hungary the relationship of the left and right towards one another is like fire and water. Foreign readers should understand however that they have always been fire and water! After 1990 – as I have mentioned – it seemed that this would change, unfortunately however, this has not come to be. Between 1990 and 2006, governments changed every four years, and then the situation reverted back to where it left off, before communism. All this supports the diagnosis, that society and political culture are very important factors; if they do not prefer cooperation and governing together, then these will not happen. There will be something else instead: unrelenting political struggle.

In the mid-term we have to find a gradual transition to cooperation and grand coalition governing. The think tank which I lead has been working for years to help the Hungarian political elite and society find a solution to this problem. Naturally, this activity is not direct. We are not counselors of any party or government. Nevertheless we find it important to present Western European models. We try and show how the culture of cooperation that made liberal democracy successful, evolved in Europe and the world. We look for ways to help society and political parties in achieving this at home.

We see also that – exactly because of the traditions that are laden with the deficit of liberalism and democracy – it is very hard to change public morale. Everyone in Hungary thinks today that Fidesz and the opposition can never move toward one another. We try and show our readers that even in Hungarian history we can find sporadic patterns of cooperation. If we do not find these, then the European Union will never understand us. The majority of Europe is already over these questions and – rightly – expects that the newly joined Central Eastern European countries follow the rules of the „club” that have been laid down decades ago. Hungary is seen as one of the most renitent countries, which often goes against these rules. Thus Europe thinks that if it can get rid of Viktor Orbán, the cooperation with Hungary will once again be carefree and without obstacles.

Not to cool the expectations, however I would like to indicate again, that Hungary’s past does not spoil us with such strategies for cooperation. The political camp with which the West could easily cooperate with is rather small. Small, because in Hungarian history the
main tradition – whether we like it or not – is national isolation. I am a Hungarian political analyst; I am familiar with the relevant literature. I cannot behave as if though they did not exist. Centuries formed this country into the way it is, and the decade that has passed since the EU accession have brought minor changes at most. That is: it is fearful, that a Hungary without Orbán will not bring the change that those in Western Europe would hope from it.

This is why I think, that for its own sake, the West would do well to consider more seriously the legitimacy of a future grand coalition. This would contain the elite of the currently governing party and that of the current opposition; a complete exchange of the political elite seems delusory in Hungary. The voters demand a traditional right-wing – with or without Viktor Orbán – the same way they need the parties of the current opposition. This is not a country where within a matter of months a party like Podemos appears from nowhere; new parties in Hungary could barely hold their ground, and even out of them, one is situated on the radical right. Thus, the future, in the mid-run, points in the direction of a grand coalition.

If this does not come about, Hungary may get stuck in a polarization that is even more extreme than the current one; the life or death rivalry of the two parties will make it impossible to carry out exactly that which is the aim of Europe; for Hungary to be a constructive member of the EU community.

In order for it to be this way, we have to bravely break with the popular opposition opinion of „never with Fidesz!” We also have to break with the government slogan, of never with this opposition! From the sea of „nevers” there will evolve greater and greater resistance, perhaps even a revolution, but is this the only way? Would it be good for Europe, if everything would collapse in the bitter government-opposition struggle in Hungary? My definite answer is that it would not do any good. The only way Hungary can feel comfortable as a member in Europe is if left and right participate together as equals in domestic politics with the aim of establishing European values. As long as such government does not exist I’m afraid Hungary cannot step out of the role of the „black sheep”.

It is worth thinking about the „Next Hungry” therefore, because the current one is furnished for static warfare. The point of this static warfare is that the position of the government and its opposition may change, but the nature of their relationship is constant. It
doesn’t matter if instead of Viktor Orbán a well-known opposition leader comes, or an unknown person from one of the civic movements. The situation does not change because the problem is not handled at the roots. The root in this case is the systematic learning of cooperation and a grand coalition eventually being set up based on this which will then govern for at least two terms.

Hungary could send a positive message through this to the world, while it could prove to itself as well that it is able to get over the burdensome legacy of the past. But in order for it to be able to do this, first, we must not deny the existence of this heritage. If we understand this both at home and abroad, perhaps there is a chance to transcend these together. If this one-sided incomprehension remains, it will always create the Viktor Orbán of its times who will want to fly in the face of this domestic and international incomprehension.

Naturally, The Next Hungary is not a screen-play; it is not about a set of steps to be completed one after another. It is a review of just some of the problems. Centre for Fair Political Analysis has been working tenaciously ever since its formation (2007) to raise these problems again and again, free from daily politics. It is not an accident that we chose as our motto „Conflict, consensus and cohesion”. Social cohesion, once again, is an expression well-known for centuries which however is weak in Central Eastern Europe and in Hungary. Political cooperation and a grand coalition is not just necessary because the political elite could be more effective in this way, but also so the society that supported the change of regime in Hungary can regain that joy, and realize that it is not just an atomized mass of people, but a community destined to achieve common goals.


More information on the e-book on our website.