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The Hungarian Prime Minister and geopolitics

As Fareed Zakaria wrote in a noteworthy article 17 years ago, constitutional liberalism has led us to democracy, democracy, however does not necessarily lead to constitutional liberalism. It perfectly reflects the approach of the main trends of political science in the past decades. Although the Prime Minister’s provocative statement made in Tusnádfürdő could be seen as proof to Zakaria’s theory, let’s not stop here.

There is a very interesting question without which I fear it is useless to comment on the dispute concerning who and to what extent is out of their mind? This issue – lacking a better definition – is what I call the geopolitical context. The Hungarian Prime Minister made his statement with a geopolitical situation in mind that currently doesn’t exist, but used to, meaning that it can reoccur at any other time. Could this have been what he meant at the end of his speech, when he said “anything can happen”?

In the last two decades it has become clear in the West that the euphoria following the 1990 transition did not prove to be true. In 2012 an American and a Dutch political analyst, Erin Jenne and Cas Muddle posed the question already in the title of their article, that is, can outsiders do anything to stop the illiberal revolution in Hungary. Also, another theory says that a relapse necessarily follows democratization. Samuel Huntington speaks of cycles of democratizing movements and counter-movements in his 1991 book, (still unavailable in Hungarian) on late 20th century democratization. His model shows that for every experiment there was a reversal; the democratization wave starting in 1975 (and continuing in 1989-1990) was the third one, but after that – not described by Huntington, but seen through our own experience – the third wave has been going on since the 1990s.

This suggests that Orbán simultaneously met Zakaria’s and Huntington’s theory.

Not exactly though. This is where we arrive to the geopolitical situation. This view has been largely forgotten in the last 25 years and no wonder: if liberal democracy conquered – which seemed certain after 1990 – what situation remains? If there aren’t two world poles, then all we can talk about is the peaceful co-existence of states sharing the values of liberal democracy. Out of all the Hungarian parties, only Fidesz takes geopolitics into consideration
since 1994; a discipline that was just as mainstream in the 1960s and 70s as is liberal democracy today. Back then, everything revolved around “political development”, which by no means meant balanced development, but the separate development of countries with different histories and cultures. Legions of prestigious political scientists argued against forcing Western democratic models onto other countries.

In another one of his works, Huntington points out that in countries that have gone through huge changes in society, institutions easily lose their orienting roles, or it is much harder to stabilize them. However, the post-1990 transitions emphasized the consolidation and upholding of institutions – in the name of the dominant liberal ideology naturally. Orbán clearly does not relate to this approach, but to the former perception which was formulated in the 1960s and was then prevalent and dominant. Moreover, he could have been right since many questions have not yet been answered after 1990, just suspended.

It is as if Viktor Orbán is hopeful that a new era of geopolitical positioning has come, with nation-states as a central element just like in the 1960s. The Hungarian Prime Minister simply returns to a concept considered dominant half a century ago, and says: Let us regard Hungary a “developing country”, as the developed Western world saw the states just reclaiming their national independence. This is exactly why, since to him this reclaimed independence is the exemplar, he is unmoved by liberalism. As a “national” democrat, he does not know how to deal with the notion of “liberal democracy”. Nevertheless, the question still remains open, whether the splitting of the two concepts in Hungary is just connected to him and his government. Perhaps there is more to this than what meets the eye. This is just another question that would be worthy of debate.