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Orbán, the West, and Perspectives for Atlanticism



Not only are foreigners surprised and stunned by the rhetoric and foreign policy of the Orbán-government it has led to several forceful statements lately as well. To name a few Western, mainly American, examples from the past weeks, George Clooney used Orbán as a deterrent, while President-elect Joe Biden called him an autocratic leader. The political scientist, Pippa Norris, wrote an article in Foreign Affairs where she mentioned Hungary in the company of the Philippines, Poland and Venezuela.

These approaches are often exaggerated, nevertheless they express a practically universal public sentiment: Western politicians and a large part of the public feel that Hungary is not just not an open society but it is no longer a democracy.

The approach of the West is based on the fact that following 1990 Hungary was the frontrunner of the region therefore it does not understand how the current situation could come about. To this we can say that politics in Hungary is not articulated by the usual Western European ideological trends. Even the leading party of the regime change, Magyar Demokrata Fórum (Hungarian Democratic Forum - MDF) was not a classical conservative party in the European sense. It was a large party made up of several camps of sometimes conflicting political views. Therefore political cooperation with the West could not be based on stable grounds. Concerning foreign policy the stable base would have been atlanticism which did actually exist with certain restrictions. After MDF however, Fidesz became the dominant right wing party and for them atlanticism was truly just one of its internal currents. Needless to say, if there isn't a party that is completely Western in every way, then the politics it follows won't be that either.

What characterizes the relationship to the West from the Hungarian side has been ambivalent for a long time. There is just one period in Hungarian political history when this relationship

has been unquestionably clear and surprisingly this is the end of the Kádár-regime, just before the fall of socialism. The change of regime was made possible by the strong Western orientation of the political elite of the time, which changed later on. Today it is the opposition that seems to be uncompromisingly Western while the government is full of doubts.

These doubts are very similar to how the average populist looks at the elite. In their eyes the elite is distant, unknown, and as a result they cannot imagine that they could have good intentions. A non-liberal government is the same way with foreign countries. For them foreign countries are the elite. In the past ten years this fault-line has become more pronounced. Western Europe denounces the Hungarian government, the Hungarian government sees not goodwill but intrigue in this and a vicious circle arises from which it is not easy (if at all possible) to break out of.

For the international public that is critical of Orbán the Hungarian opposition seems like a good alternative, nevertheless the Hungarian opposition is very fragmented. Just recently many parties have formed a large coalition, but we don't know much about what they would do if allowed to govern. Their commitment to the European Union seems certain however their governmental competence less so. Whether or not they can oust Orbán will turn out in 2022 at the next election.

Till then Viktor Orbán has to forge a relationship with the new American leadership and soon with the successor of Angela Merkel as well. Fidesz has changed significantly throughout the years. It is quite possible that its cooperation with the Biden administration will be significantly more difficult than with Donald Trump, but on the other hand the Orbán-regime has also received a chance to at least partially return to its all but forgotten atlanticism.