

What is the Left in Hungary?

Thursday 14 February 2019, by [BENYIK Matyas](#), [VAJNAI Attila](#) (Date first published: 21 January 2017).

1. Overview of history of the left movement in Hungary from 1989

There was a system change in Hungary at the end of the 1980s. Since that time the political regimes have undergone several metamorphoses both in Hungary and in other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries.

In Hungary, the system change meant the victory of the so-called „late Kádár technocrats” who could become dominant actors within the elite groups managing the transition, because they worked closely together with the superstructure of global capitalism (i.e. IMF, WTO, World Bank, credit rating agencies, etc). In 1989 they found the catching up with the reconnection to the West, but it has never been realized.

In Hungary the new capitalism was „built from outside” and the foreign, especially the multinational capital played a decisive role. The „outside model” was implemented by the new political élite in possession of the monopoly of legitimate violence: the change has been made „typically by the state from top-down” and its real socio-economic content was dressed in national and ethnic form.

Modernization strategy was based on following the outside examples, namely: de-etatization, deregulation, privatization, monetarism, launching and managing series of social, economic and political actions according to new individualism. Today it became clear to the majority of people that Hungarian society can not be converted and stimulated to catch up by imported ideas and institutions. Hungary as an apt pupil during the years of transition has lost its leading role in CEE by now. Double marginalization has taken place: its position weakened both in the EU and in the region.

At the end of 1989 the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (MSZMP) having more than 800 thousand members (i. e. the „old Left”) was splitted by an internal coup d’etat of the MSZMP. The „reformist” current under the new name of Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) took advantage of nostalgia for socialism in words and dislike of the masses against capitalism, but also brought up pro-capital, savage neoliberal policies.

Faithful communists simultaneously formed the Workers’ Party (WP), but this „old Left” was unable to enter the Parliament due to a strong anticommunist propaganda and the raised threshold, thereby loosing significant state support and initiating the WP to the decline. It is a special tragic development that in the middle of 2000s, a further split of the „old Left” took place, because the leader of the WP, namely Gyula Thürmer waged a ceaseless slander campaign against his critical inner-party opponents, who have finally formed the „new Left”, i. e. the Workers’ Party 2006 (WP2006). Since 2005 Thürmer’s activity has been very contradictory and highly discredited the communist movement in Hungary.

By 2010, after eight years in government the MSZP had eroded the popularity to such an extent that it lost 60% of its former voters (1.4 million people) and its traditional coalition partner, the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) disappeared from the political map of Hungary.

In parallel with the weakening of MSZP and the disappearance of SZDSZ, new parties and movements have started to rise in an effort to become inevitable political actors at the time of the parliamentary elections in 2014. Just to mention few examples:

a.) The left-wing criticism against Fidesz and a growing dissatisfaction of the society led in October 2012 to the birth of a new movement (or umbrella organisation) called Together 2014 (Együtt), which aimed to unite the opposition vote in a bid to unseat PM Viktor Orbán. Together 2014 was an electoral alliance between former PM Gordon Bajnai's Patriotism and Progress, the civic movement One Million for Press Freedom (Milla) and the trade union-based Solidarity Movement.

b.) Democratic Coalition (Demokratikus Koalíció-DK) is the result of the split of MSZP under the leadership of the former socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. DK mainly addresses the older liberal and left-wing voters in Hungary.

c.) The Green Party Politics Can Be Different (Lehet Más a Politika-LMP) was also divided over the question of joining Together 2014 or just negotiating with Gordon Bajnai and finally resulted in the split of LMP and a new party was established under the name of Dialogue for Hungary (PM).

d.) There was a large push on some of the civil protests movements to transform them into political parties and several groups have broken off from Milla and Solidarity and became political party (e.g. Fourth Republic – 4K! led by Andras Istvanffy, by now it has been dissolved).

e.) The Left Party (A BAL – Balpárt) is a left-wing socialist political party and was formed at a meeting in March 2014. It draws its membership from different civil society organizations as well as former members of the MSZP and the Green Left (Zöld Bal).

Along with the Hungarian party system, a new election law was passed in 2012 by the ruling right-wing Fidesz introducing a one-round system where single-member constituencies make up 53% of parliamentary seats. A new compensation list system was also introduced which also favours major parties against smaller ones. The new system clearly benefits unified political blocks and disadvantages those without an ability to cooperate. In addition, related new laws introduce the institution of voter registration – an unfamiliar and unnecessary institution in a country where precise lists of voters already exist. This legal environment „sentenced to death” small and middle sized parties with weaker ground operations and clearly favors massive political blocks such as Fidesz and to some extent MSZP. The unequivocal consequence of this new system has been the fact that the still small opposition movements most probably could not defeat Fidesz in 2018.

For a long time, the sphere of civil society has been swallowed up by the sphere of politics, but this cannot just be regarded as an achievement of the nationalistic and authoritarian political systems. The organizations that had emerged during the period of transition and immediately afterwards, and which had seen themselves as engines of social movements, have perished, so that today only the organizations of the political right display some of the characteristics of social movements. Those sectors of civil society that are critical of the political system and are holding on, in principle, to the long-term aim of societal counter-power, are very weak and not in a position to unite their forces.

In addition to the weakness of the anti-capitalist and anti-systemic organizations and networks they are also deeply divided among themselves. One can distinguish among them three main currents:

1.) The Hungarian United Left (or Magyar Egyesült Baloldal-MEBAL), which brings together groups such as Attac Hungary, Foundation for Hungarian Social Forum, and small associations such as the workers' leisure association of Franzensstadt, an area of Budapest. Most of its initiators and activists are Marxist intellectuals.

2.) The second significant current is the Workers Party of Hungary 2006 – European Left (Magyarországi Munkáspárt 2006, member of the European Left).

3.) The third camp in the anti-systemic left consists of anarchist and anarcho-communist groups, which are competing amongst each other. These groups attack both the state and any traditional form of political organization. This camp embodies the idea of the left as political subculture. Happenings reported in the liberal press are more important to many of them than mass action. The representatives of this camp see themselves as anti-fascist and anti-racist.

All these above groups are closely connected to those anti-capitalist traditions of the CEE region, which, through the self-organization of society want to disconnect themselves from capitalism.i

2. Current situation and possible strategies for the future

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has transformed Fidesz into a party that seems increasingly driven by a combination of ethnic nationalism, authoritarianism and populism with the government increasingly cracking down on media and NGOs considered „disloyal” to the nation (i. e. to Orbán and Fidesz), and with strong populism, which presents Orbán as the authentic voice of the Hungarian people who are fighting off a leftwing conspiracy. Orbán now is the almighty ruler of Hungary. He does not just warn about „the survival or disappearance of European values and nations”, but he organised xenophobic referendum campaigns and built barbed wire fences on Hungary's southern borders.ii Orbán, who never had a job, but became a professional politician, learned the lessons of the past and used the situation to surround himself by legal walls from all sides during the last six years. He reorganized the system of ministries centralizing the political decision making and put his own clients everywhere into the key positions. Orbán placed the media under strict government control, let prepare a new constitution, cut the rights of the Constitutional Court and put new members into it, created a control body over the courts of justice. His ideology is a horrible mixture of old past nationalistic ideas about the big Hungary of 15 million inhabitants; revisionism that create tensions inside and with the neighbouring countries, mainly with Romania and Slovakia; traditional dogmas of Christianity against human dignity and women rights. Orbán neglects the workers' rights and tripartite decision making about labor laws. He „has vacuumed up Hungary's assets, putting them either in his pocket or the pockets of people close to him. This is not a secret. His kleptocracy has been well studied.”iii Orbán's rightist government has been continuing an anti-communist crusade since it came into power, repartizing the names of the streets and institutions somehow connected to the „communist past”. Recently the archive of Georg Lukács—a preeminent Marxist of the 20th century—has been under a brutal attack. It has been gradually deprived of its subvention from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and of its ability to pay its staff. Now, the government threatens to sell the property on which it is located and disperse the archive. A foundation has been formed in Hungary to endeavor to protect and preserve the archive.iv Members of Workers Party of Hungary 2006-European Left (WPH2006) and progressive CSOs have joined this effort and have helped to organize an international support, including PELs support as well. All these arrangements reduce democracy, which could hardly be called a „national revolution”, because these measures have nothing to do with the real national interests and even less with revolutions that pave the way towards progress. Fidesz wants to change the meaning of Hungary's borders, rather than the borders themselves. It has tried to do this by giving all „ethnic Hungarians” citizenship of Hungary, though preferring them to remain in the ancient lands of pre-Trianon Hungary.v In a speech at Bálványos summer open university and student camp in

Romania in July 2015, Orbán said: "What we have at stake today is Europe, the European way of life, the survival or disappearance of European values and nations, or their transformation beyond recognition ... We would like Europe to be preserved for the Europeans. But there is something we would not just like but we want because it only depends on us: we want to preserve a Hungarian Hungary."^{vi} Having bent the Hungarian state to his will, crushed his domestic foes and spun political gold from Europe's migrant crisis, Orbán now has his sights trained on the immigration-friendly elites he claims seek to destroy Europe's nations from within. Together with Jarosław Kaczyński, the de facto leader of Poland, he promises a „cultural counter-revolution” in Europe, based on a defence of nation, family and Christianity.^{vii} Since the beginning of January 2015, Orbán has started to adapt a hostile rhetoric towards immigrants and he has repeatedly claimed that Hungary belongs to the Hungarians and will not welcome everybody who wants to settle down in the country. The motivation behind Fidesz's extreme right turn and the key to Orbán's success might also lie in the fact that he manages to engage more and more right-wing voters. Another, even more dangerous scenario may also possibly develop, namely a closer cooperation than ever between Fidesz and Jobbik. In the first half of 2015 Fidesz had been losing support on a massive scale before the public attention shifted to the refugee crisis, and the main beneficiary was far-right Jobbik. Orbán halted both the downward slide of his own party, as well as the rise of Jobbik, which had previously appeared unstoppable. That this owed in large part to the instigation of public fears about migrants is beyond doubt, as is the fact that the issue proved very successful in removing corruption news from the front pages of newspapers.^{viii} The immigration crisis has drawn attention to the future of Europe. It is a crucial dilemma whether the Western elite is able to change its policy, because Europe should be facing not only the long dragging immigration crisis. Important steps are needed to strengthen the position of the European market and the geopolitical interests of the continent should finally be recognized. It is a question whether the pragmatic unity of the Visegrad states concerning immigration holds on in the discussions on the future of the EU. On 7 September 2016 there was a roundtable discussion entitled "Is there a future for the Hungarian economy outside the European Union?" between the five parliamentary parties. Secretary of State Nándor Csepreghy of Fidesz, similarly to Jobbik Vice-President Daniel Z. Kárpáti was on the opinion that criticism of the EU's current operation does not mean that a party would want to leave the EU, rather it wants to deal with the problem that we "have not entered into this EU". Csepreghy confirmed there is a consensus among the participants that Hungary's place is in the EU. According Csepreghy due to Brexit a multi-decade trend characterized by the integration came to a halt and now the issue entered into the public discussion again: what membership really means for the individual member states. "The EU would not become the United States of Europe, like the US, because they are too large differences between the EU Member States"- Csepreghy added. In his view, on the basis of reality we should learn from the USA how to reconcile the value- and interest-based politics.^{ix} On 13 September 2016 after the meeting in Budapest with Stanisław Karczewski, President of the Polish Senate, PM Orbán said „There is a complete agreement between Hungary and Poland on the future of the EU and most of the issues relating to migration crisis.”^x On 14 September 2016 after the common

Bulgarian-Turkish border inspection together with Bulgarian PM Boyko Borissov Orbán said: "Everyone must understand that Europe's future will be decided not in Brussels, but here, where we stand at the Bulgarian-Turkish border". Regarding the Bulgarian border protection questions Orbán declared: „Bulgaria adamantly defends itself, no traces of naïveté can be seen, one cannot go far with European blah-blah and precautionary measures needed here.”^{xi} On 29 September 2016 in a lengthy interview made by newspaper „Lokal” Orbán said: „According to the surveys, we, Hungarians, are one of the most committed countries to the European Union. It is another point that according to us the current policy is needed to change, but our commitment to the common future of Europe remains strong. In fact, we want to change precisely in order to preserve Europe that we all love, feel as our homes and for which we have had so many sacrifices”.^{xii} Orbán sees the main dangers of migration for the Hungarian society as follows: „First, and foremost there is the ubiquitous security. The immigrants are deceived with promises of prosperity enticing them for thousands of kilometers long dangerous journey. It is an inhuman thing if someone is forced or induced to live in another country, where a series of disappointments is met. And those who are deceived will get angry. The cheated immigrants mass create a constant source of conflict. Not to mention that some angry young men are being recruited by terrorists. In addition, immigrants do not share European values. For example, we Europeans respect for women and look at them as equals – while their habit is different. In all European countries monogamy is agreed to, polygamy is a criminal category – for the immigrants the opposite is natural. The European legal order and the Islamic law cannot be reconciled. To take care of the masses of immigrants represents a burden on our economy. Their catering and education cost a lot of money, while many millions of people are unemployed in Europe. Changes in the ethnic, religious and cultural proportions are not a negligible factor either. In the case of Hungarian communities living in the Trianon successor states we see what happens when a minority suddenly becomes a majority. During a lifetime the ground could be pulled out from under our feet. (...)”^{xiii}

Hungary was a major entry point into the EU for migrants coming from the Middle East, so it had become a transit point for migrants looking to settle in Europe. The Orbán government reacted by building a razor bladed wire fence of 110 miles long on its border with Serbia. Today, thousands of migrants wait at the border, hoping to make it into the EU—while others find ways to breach the fence.

Twelve years after their accession to the EU, the question of CEE countries' solidarity with the rest of the EU has arisen for the first time. The countries of the region have been asked to share the burden of the migration crisis through relocation quotas, and they have refused. The most up-front statements regarding migration come from Orbán, who emphasizes the importance of securing the EU's external border. He wants to stop immigration, while the European Commission wants only to organize it. The fundamental difference between the proposed solutions comes from that contradiction. Threatening CEE states with the suspension of EU funds and treating them as second-class members doesn't help unity either.

The anti-immigrant rhetoric used by Viktor Orbán and Czech President Miloš Zeman is distasteful and racist. Orbán's referendum on EU migrant quotas on 2nd October 2016 was an open challenge to Brussels. Though his referendum failed to meet the required turnout threshold, but it remains a worrisome message of hostility toward the EU.

Furthermore, political communication in many countries is at times downright hostile to the EU, and at least at the political level there is a growing scepticism towards future integration and an

increasing insistence on more national sovereignty. This boosts the influence of euro-sceptic ideas and pushes them into the mainstream of European politics. Over the past years, Fidesz has relentlessly emphasised Brussels' alleged attempts at influencing Hungarian affairs, and has called for a fundamental rearrangement of the supranational organization to give fewer powers to the centre.

The division over the EU's response to the refugee crisis and the way it was communicated in some CEE countries suggests that this issue was more than a mere policy disagreement – it increasingly looks like another symptom of a fundamental rift between the western core of the EU and large segments of the recently acceded CEE states. The EU has always had to grapple with countries and governments that sought to halt or even reverse integration. With the rise of populists all across the EU, there are more parallel storms brewing for the EU than perhaps at any other time in its history. However, though there are some key overlaps and common causes, on the whole the growing strength of euro-scepticism in Western Europe is not the same as the particular challenge that the dominance of CEE populists represents. Correspondingly, the strategies for handling western euro-sceptic movements, parties or governments must also differ, at least to some extent, from the way the EU will address the tensions with its new member states. The EU's ability to identify such a strategy and to interact in new ways with its CEE members will be one of the key determinants of its ability to continue the integration project.

Fidesz is not in imminent danger of losing power. This is due primarily to two factors: problems among the opposition parties and voter apathy. In addition, the opposition is divided and disorganized. Orbán's real success is his focus on politics rather than policy. He has manipulated the system, and has a base of consistent support. There is an opposition to Orbán, but it is tainted both by disorganization and a lack of interest in the democratic process.

As for voter apathy, a recent poll in Hungary found that 84 percent of the people who want to see Fidesz out of power said they would not bother to vote. Hungarian sociologist Borbala Kriza believes young people in Hungary "are either completely apolitical or are active in the far right. ... The far right has been able to not just build a party, Jobbik, but also a political subculture." Whether or not this is an accurate reflection of all of Hungary's youth culture, it is an indication of a problem that must be addressed in the political fight against Fidesz and Jobbik.^{xiv}

WPH2006 opposes the policy of the Orbán government and the evolution of the far-right Jobbik, the neonazi national guards and the proliferation of racist ideas, actions against the roma population and generally against the poor. WPH2006 works for organizing a broad national front to defend democracy, workers rights and social achievements of the past. Under the years of state socialism increased production made it possible to establish a broad social system. Education and health services were equally free for all members of the population and achieved high level. Culture and mass sports received increasing state support. During the past 25 years privatization ruined the industry and the agriculture. Half of the GDP and about three fourth of the industrial export are produced by foreign owned companies, while only one third of the labor force employed in these industries. This means a high productivity, however, 1.5 million people lost their jobs in the early 1990s. The output of agriculture is about 25 percent less than before. By 2015 Hungary's foreign debt was more than 3 times higher than in 1990. An immense differentiation in income and wealth has developed. Only one third of the population was a winner of the system change, while, on the other end, another third fell in extreme poverty. According to sociological investigations two hundred thousand children suffer from hunger and receive to eat only at schools. Recently several movements have arisen against certain government decisions and organized demonstrations (e.g. teachers, healthcare workers). In February 2015 a group of

unemployed organized a hunger march from the northern industrial town of Miskolc to Budapest to hand their demand to the parliament.

WPH2006 supports these initiatives, keeps close connections with trade-unions and tries to organize protests into a general movement. However, WPH2006 is a small party and its human and financial resources are limited, and so, the unification of efforts needs more time.

The majority of the population is in a state of desperation. When you see that most of the public and European financial sources are used for building Orbán's empire of companies (plus estates, castles, etc), moreover, a renewed up Carmelite monastery in Buda castle for the residences of Orbán for 23 billion HUF (about 75 M EUR) and a budget to furnish his study room for almost 4 billion HUF (!), while the details of child hunger are distressing and the ruling Fidesz' popularity unchanged, it will force many people into helpless hatred, which is not a good adviser. Some of the hatred of the powerless is directed towards the quarrelsome "opposition parties" as if they were unwilling to change. Indeed, it looks as if there is nothing to impede Orbán's another victory in 2018.

This perspective in itself causes further political pathologies, especially when the official bourgeois opposition has only raised technical proposals (e.g. pre-election, a grand coalition with the far-right Jobbik), or seaweed into personal combinations (e.g. whether Mayor László Botka or someone else should be the PM candidate). The public opposition (including the conservatives) is fleeing and raging. The only encouragement could be now that it is high time to create and organize a new left-wing social and political movement operating independently of any of the currently ruling political force and radically distancing itself from the „bourgeois-democratic” or other politics.

Due to the very difficult conditions, the political tactics of the left-wing groups belonging to or approaching the European party alliance (PEL) should be a complex one. Until the Hungarian parliamentary elections in 2018 we cannot rule out the formation of a very wide party coalition, anxious to defend the values of democracy. If the Liberals do not smash this endeavor, the representatives of the political alternative of PEL can join this broad coalition that could essentially be the alliance of the progressive forces against the ruling right-wing government.

If this alliance formation came true – for which there is less chance due to the anti-communist and the power-oriented attitude of the liberal parties – in the run up for the EP elections in 2019 – there would be even more need to build up an electoral alliance representing a genuine left alternative electoral structure that were clearly displaying the political program and the main initiatives of PEL in the EP electoral struggle.

Simultaneously, in addition to the parties, it is an imperative and urgent task to strengthen the social movement organizing joint actions of the left-wing civil society organizations (CSOs), looking basically for such solutions of social issues that could mobilize both the national and the European sister organizations. As a good example it is worth mentioning the two events held lately by the Austrian, the Czech and the Hungarian member parties.

In the future we wish to continue our traditional Leftist Island Festivals as well. Last year the Festival – organized by the Organizers for the Left (SZAB) at Horány in the Regatta Leisure Center, situated 20 kms from the heart of Budapest, on the riverbank of Danube between 2nd and 4th September – was merged with an one day CEE Working Group Conference event in preparation to the 5th congress of the PEL held in Berlin between 16 and 18 December 2016. The combined event, on the one hand proved to be very cost-effective, and on the other hand, the conference has given the participants an unforgettable political and cultural experience. In addition it has provided us an

opportunity for dialogues and succeeded to build up a much closer relationship between the Hungarian Left (including the WPH2006 and other left oriented political parties like the Left Bloc of the MSZP, the PM, The Left-A BAL, two Social Democratic parties (historical and Roma), CSOs, movements, groups, individuals and about a dozen left-wing actors of CEE. Trade union confederations (National Confederation of Hungarian Trade Unions-MASZSZ, Forum for the Co-operation of Trade Unions- SZEF) and the Miners Trade Union did also participate. Parallely with the Festival, the Executive Committee of the International Federation of Resistance Fighters (FIR) - Association of Antifascists held its meeting and commemorations as well.

To accomplish all these important activities in the future we deem it indispensable to be present more actively in the alternative/social media, and the new PEL website - together with the related publishing activities - could furnish us a great help in this respect.

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