

The Transition from Liberal Democracy: The Political Crisis in Hungary

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Viktor Orbán's right-wing government came to power in Hungary in the spring of 2010; since doing so, it has significantly altered the country's public legal infrastructure. It unilaterally voted on a new Constitution, it has substantially weakened the balance of power, and it has done away with the principle of power sharing. Power is concentrated in the hands of the prime minister, who does all that he can to establish a monopoly of power: his notion of a "central arena of power" has thus become a reality.

Between 1990 and 2010 Hungary had been a functioning liberal democracy, when judged against the principles and practices of a modern, Western-type democracy—that is, characterized by competition between political parties, the participation of civil society, and respect for civil rights. In 2011, democracy fell into a crisis in Hungary. It has not completely disappeared, but it is in deep crisis. Led by Orbán, the ruling party, *Fidesz*,¹ has succeeded in destroying the components of a consensus-based liberal democracy in the name of a majoritarian democracy. But Orbán has gone even beyond this, since the eliminating of independent institutions has transformed this so-called majoritarian democracy into a highly centralized, illiberal regime. The "majority" today is nothing but an obtuse justification for the ruling political party to further cement its power in a country where the qualified majority of citizens now believe that things have gone badly awry. If this so-called "revolutionary" process continues, the result will be a solidly authoritarian semi-democracy, both in the short run and, if they get their way, in the long run as well.

This anti-liberal, anti-democratic turn did not emerge out of the blue: it was a direct response to the hectic, incoherent reforms implemented between 2006 and 2010, as well as the corruption and the economic crisis that ensued. The rise of the Orbán regime has deeper roots as well, ones that point to structural, cultural, and political factors that evolved over the period of post-transition Hungary. These include the early institutionalization of a qualified majority consensus, which has obstructed reforms over the past two decades; a plethora of informal practices, ranging from tax evasion to political party financing, that have stalled formal democratic institution

building; and the serious impact of existing democratic forms on competition between political parties (i.e., the phenomenon of “partocracy”), which has gradually killed off both the willingness of civic groups to engage in politics and incentives for results-based performance by governments, and has instilled a hatred in the populace towards politicians and politics. The survival of privileged and influential social groups on the other side of the transition has also destroyed networks of solidarity, thereby further discrediting democracy. Finally, the failure of meaningful economic reforms made the country defenseless against the global financial crisis that exploded in 2008. Taken together, these have produced a perfect political storm; let us now review these points one by one.

The Reasons Behind the Establishment of the Orbán Regime

The Early Institutionalization of the Compulsion to Form a Consensus

During the transition to democracy in Hungary, consensus-building was perceived as a “prestigious” political measure. The “Founding Fathers”² wanted the new, democratic institutional system to be placed on as wide a consensus as possible. Meanwhile, the outgoing representatives of the old regime wanted to retain their voice in politics. As a result, a complete set of rules was born that sought to strengthen the new democratic order, its stability, and its governability, including the qualified majority rules, which affected a wide spectrum of policy issues. Apparently, the “Founding Fathers” believed that they could safeguard freedom by increasing the number of decisions that required a qualified majority vote.

These measures created a democracy in which between elections, the ruling government’s power became almost “cemented.” It became nearly impossible to remove an incumbent government from the outside; however, this simultaneously made effective governance more difficult. The government in power, due to the high volume of qualified majority rules, had to rely on the *opposition* to make decisions on basic issues. Paradoxically, the Constitution thus granted both much power *and* limited political responsibility to the government.

The 1989 “Founding Fathers” of democracy exhibited an ambivalent attitude toward the notion of power. They wanted a strong, democratic form of government based on wide popular support; at the same time, they were averse to the very idea of power itself. To ensure the country’s effective governability, the “Founding Fathers” provided excessive safeguards to the political system in comparison to other segments of society. Simply put, they overestimated the populace’s desire for stability. What the “Founding Fathers” did not take into account was that the “illusion of stability” over the long haul could make the system inflexible. The desire for stability is associated not only with the legacy of the era of János Kádár (1956-88); today, it is linked to the hectic, neocapitalist system of the past twenty years and the injustices it produced.

Democracy in Hungary, in the formal sense, is the most stable in all of Central Europe, because since 1990, all coalition governments completed their four-year mandates. Having said that, formal stability has come with a price, because regulation has prevented the political system from correcting itself. The constitutional system between 1990 and 2010 guaranteed that the government remained in power for the entire cycle, and it thereby ensured the governability of the country; however, it also straight-jacketed the incumbent government via the qualified majority rules. These measures, raised to the constitutional level, proved counterproductive. There are additional institutional-structural reasons that explain Hungary's inability to react to external challenges promptly, and why Hungary became more vulnerable than other countries during the global crisis. Psychological and institutional stability are valuable facets. However, it has become clear that treating the idea of stability as a fetish has thwarted the country's development.

The Practice of Informality

Throughout its history, Hungary was an occupied country, and occupation produced a political culture characterized by the lack of institutional accountability. Hungarians had learned that they only had to feign that they were obeying the rules imposed upon them by foreign invaders: below the surface, they established a system of informal rules governing society and culture. Hungarians lived with the duality composed of formal and informal rules, rules which most often were inherently ambiguous and contradictory. Therefore, Hungarians learned to amble their way around these rules in a conniving fashion, finding loopholes and cutting corners, and this behavioral pattern remains deeply ingrained in Hungarian society. They gave the proverbial emperor what the emperor demanded, as it were, but they also evaded taxes where they could. They began to push for individual interests vis-à-vis the government by organizing informal networks and small groups; however, they did not form formal organizations, such as unions. Civil society groups and unions helped individuals orient themselves and survive not through collective action, but rather via hush-hush negotiations.

The Kádár regime became a "soft dictatorship" because it was softened by lies. The reason it became more livable is that the system often did not take its own rules seriously. Practicing the system of double rules continued, and one had to navigate the maze of formal and informal rules with caution. Under Kádárism, citizens grew accustomed to those procedures that made the dictatorship bearable. For Hungarians, the old system was not nearly as bad as it had been for the Poles, the Czechs, or the Romanians. Thus, in 1989 Hungarians only broke with the formal system, but not with the customs and informal procedures associated with that system. The dictatorship became more corrupt and this sweetened the system, but it does not follow from this necessarily that every system is better corrupt. Moreover, illusions attached to the oppressive system made it all the more difficult to break with the political culture of

Kádár's dictatorship.

The political sphere assumed increasing power over various segments of society, from the media through the economy, from education through the social sectors to the theater. Election results determine who may become the editor of a newspaper, school principal, theater director, or economic leader. In Hungary, in contrast to the standards in normal democracies elsewhere, it is extremely important which party is in power. This means that the financial security of many depends not on professional merit and performance, but rather on the given political circumstances and the ability of people to position themselves. This frustrates all of those who wish to deliver in their respective fields professionally. Such a clientelistic society is built on the phenomenon of informality, and the political parties try to deepen their influence through its practice.

The main issues during the past twenty years of Hungary's democracy were not primarily based on the constitutional problems of 1989, but rather the ambivalent relationship of Hungarian society to the formal political institutions. The period following the 1989 Revolution often surprisingly resembles the era before the revolution, because society often tries to fashion its own informal customs to the new rules.

The Phenomenon of Partocracy

During the second decade of democracy in Hungary party politics superseded almost all other aspects. The confrontation between the ruling government and its opposition became so intense that it became nearly impossible to solve the country's problems through negotiations, which would have required responsible policy debates and wide-ranging consultations. Fidesz initiated confrontation after 1998 as a means of strengthening its initially weaker political position; it was determined to divide society using a politics of symbolism. Public discourse was based on party allegiance and such discourse could not replace (or at least complement) the necessary policy dialogue or the unbiased popular discourse. The phenomenon of "partocracy" appeared: what had once been the party-state was replaced by the state of democratic parties.

There are several reasons for the political crisis in Hungary that unfolded after the autumn of 2006, and one of them is the rule of the parties. The reforms announced by former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány in 2006 did not take the power of partocracy into account. In a strong democracy, party pluralism unfurls within the legal framework and is checked by other actors in the system. As such, competition between the parties cannot transform into the dominance of the parties. In Hungary, however, a system was established whereby democracy almost exclusively is exercised by parties, and for this reason, the welfare of the public becomes secondary to the interests of the parties. A system of codependence has evolved that governs both the relationships within and amongst the parties, and one of the most important elements of this system is its policy of rewarding and issuing threats to individual members.

Thus, party leaders can maintain both “confidence” as well as “solidarity” with one another, because they know everything about each other’s affairs.

In Hungary, parties assumed civic duties. It was the parties that had organized “movements”; it was the parties that had established “public benefit” foundations, “professional” groups, and the “civic” circles. Parties are the ones that delegate curators to various committees; they seek expert advice of their own experts; moreover, they have their own journalists write media reports. In such a system, there are no independent economic experts and market players, only think tanks that are sustained by the parties and their strawmen. In this system, affairs can only be settled through the parties and their clientele. The state is a state of the parties, together with its tax authority and security forces.

The particular features of the Hungarian political system, including the collection of candidate nomination slips, the high threshold for entering parliament, the large number of regulatory areas in which there is a requirement to have a qualified majority in order to create laws, the opacity of political party financing, and the privileged position of political party foundations, and so on, facilitate the survival of already-existing parties and make it more difficult for new political forces to enter parliament. Hungarian electoral laws are amongst the least proportional in Europe. That said, a strong democracy does not equate to enshrining into law the opportunities provided by a multiparty system. The Hungarian system is characterized by an over-politicized society and the excessive say that political parties have in various areas of public life. This has led to the withering away of the autonomy of certain segments of society; furthermore, it has impeded the ability of the entire system for innovation. If society’s progress depends not on performance but on the party that is in power, then people lose interest in producing genuine results.

As the proportion of “partocracy” increases within a democratic system, corruption becomes an increasing temptation. It is no coincidence that to this day Hungary has no fair party finance law, nor are there any strict rules against the conflict of interests within the decision-making bodies controlled by political parties. Corruption does not seem to be an external problem, but an integral part of the system.

Democracy of Privileges

That people lost faith in democracy is presumably the responsibility of those who form public opinion. After 1989, the roles of the intellectuals changed: their goal was no longer to act as substitutes for a democracy that was missing, but rather to foster dialogue and offer alternatives, contribute to public affairs independently from political parties, participate in public debates, shape values, and raise doubts and fundamental questions.

Did serious journalists face the fact that several of their colleagues were becoming the mouthpieces of various political and economic actors, rather than expressing independent opinions and exposing issues without massaging the facts? Did these

journalists even debate this issue amongst themselves? What should we think of the Hungarian politico-economic elite, which over twenty years was unable to produce new ideas, behaving at times like a witch doctor by prescribing the same remedy for every illness? Is it true that by radically decreasing the role of the state, privatization and deregulation automatically cure the banes of the economy? Is it possible to view the state and the market in a more balanced light (i.e., that the economy and society have mutual effects on one another)? Political analysts have been stuck in giving their so-called “value-free” comments on the superficial power games of the political elites, and they do not offer any meaningful insights on the substance of democracy. Political scientists, if they are to take their profession seriously, must assess political phenomena in the social contexts in which they emerge; furthermore, political scientists must offer more profound analyses on the relationship between politics and society than they do at present. If civil society representatives turn a blind eye to the processes that are destroying democracy, it is no wonder that the politicians they themselves elected will do the same. Politicians do not live outside the parameters of society; they only do what society permits them to do. Democracy cannot be solely the affair of politicians, though naturally politicians bear greater responsibility for it than do others.

After around 2000, the intellectuals became the guardians of the status quo. It seemed that the patience of the lower classes of society was endless; it also seemed that many of those who had received higher levels of compensation from the state could “get away with” the economic transition. Not only did the memory of the transition become unpopular; the entire political class lost its credibility. A significant portion of the intellectuals is responsible for the fact that in the decade following the turn of the millennium, the consolidation of democracy turned into a farcical chasing of illusions.

Between 2002 and 2010, the proponents of the ill-conceived reform policies of the ruling former Socialist-Liberal parties tested the patience of hundreds of thousands of people, who were falling into poverty. One particular feature of the process of privatization in Hungary is that following an initial “spontaneous” period, foreign capital had the greatest ownership over the economy. Under these circumstances, the unconditional acceptance of the system, the discourse of “there is no alternative” suggested that its followers were on the side of foreign capital and not the local Hungarian population. The system did not become popular within the electorate, and as such, this perception sealed the fate of the Socialist-Liberal elite. The democratic center did not offer an alternative, for example, with an empathetic, plebeian-type of politicizing to voters. It thus gave way for the extreme Right, which in its campaign slogans sent the following message to hundreds of thousands of uprooted people: “Hungary belongs to the Hungarians.” Nearly by definition, if social solidarity from the politics of the Left is lacking, the values remaining on the side of the road are lifted up by the extreme Right based on ethnic rhetoric. In the battle for economic survival, the ethos for the fight for civil rights faded. Under neocapitalism, the labor

market had already increasingly become divided into the “important people” and the “redundant” camps. Furthermore, the technocratic elite often proved incapable of easing social tension. Exclusion from the labor market for extended periods and social marginalization served as the bases for the gain in momentum by radical anti-democratic movements.

The Failure of the Reforms and the Economic Crisis

The political transition of 1989 did not mark the end of the transformation from the old system. Economic reforms and new institutions were needed, and the new constitutional framework required content. Achieving this would have required credible politicians, or people who would swear on their lives that their ideas were not just empty rhetoric feeding the mass media. In the autumn of 2006, when its own credibility was shaken, the Hungarian government submitted a vote of confidence to go ahead with the reforms. Without this vote of confidence, society did not support the reforms. Against this backdrop, how could reforms have been pushed through? Perhaps the reforms would have succeeded had the Socialist-Liberal government clarified the rules of the game beforehand. At the time, former Socialist Prime Minister Gyurcsány’s proposed anti-corruption legislation was the only reform effort that could have garnered substantial popular support; however, this initiative also failed to pass, because the coalition parties of the time nipped it in the bud.

In Hungary, the terms “reform” and “austerity” became conflated. The political elite should have realized that instead of taking decisions in a coup-like manner—decisions that would affect the livelihoods of many—they should have held a dialogue with stakeholders. They should have been able to explain and convince voters of the anticipated long-term benefits of their policies. The disillusionment that followed was escalated by political mistakes. The prime minister’s radical speech of May 2006, held in closed circles at Balatonőszöd (parts of the speech were leaked by opponents from within the party in autumn 2006), shocked popular opinion and made it impossible for the reforms to garner popular support. The credibility of the planned reforms was questioned at the core: the very person who had initiated them admitted before his fellow party members that he had earlier not spoken truthfully.³

The reforms’ poor design generated intense debates for several years to come. Yet none of the debates made it any clearer to voters whether the sacrifices they were making for the reforms would be worthwhile. The government had no vision concerning how health care, transportation, or education would improve for citizens; deregulation and pro-market economic policies, inherited from the transition period, were its sole plans. Moreover, communicating the reforms was limited to internal discussions within the political parties. The global financial crisis that started in the autumn of 2008 reached Hungary at a time when the government was increasingly losing its domestic political credibility. The result was the nose-dive of the Hungarian

economy. Only an agreement with the IMF and a quick loan from the Fund was able to save Hungary. Gyurcsány's resignation in the spring of 2009 was a direct result of the economic crisis. His departure led to Gordon Bajnai's one-year "crisis-management" term in office, and, indeed, short-term crisis management presided over long-term reforms. It became obvious to everyone that the Socialist and Liberal forces behind the government would suffer severe losses during the 2010 general elections.

Over the past twenty years, the strategic vision that had existed in Hungary during the time of the transition was precisely what was needed for the reforms to succeed—yet it was entirely missing. The prime ministers who had exchanged hands often wanted to both implement reforms and please those who opposed reforms. Not one prime minister tried to break with the rule of "partocracy"; rather, each had merely hoped that the "partocracy" would simply accept the reforms. In 2008, voters in a referendum rejected the introduction of tuition fees in higher education and the partial co-payment within the health care system. In addition, they supported the withdrawal of the already-implemented "visit fees" to be paid to doctors. It thus became apparent that the Socialist-Liberal coalition had exhausted its political reserves. Thus, the government became weak, burdened by the demands of political governance and the severe lack of confidence that people had in the bureaucracy. Consequently, by 2010 the government had become defenseless against the emerging autocrats. The promise of a "strong state" enabled anti-democratic endeavor to gain popular support.

The democratic state does not rest upon the tips of bayonets: it is strong when it enjoys the trust bestowed upon it by its citizens, and weak if this trust is lost. During the 2010 general elections, voters began to see the Hungarian conception of "government" as producing a weak "Weimarian" state that could not maintain order. Voters increasingly believed that this weak government had turned Hungary into the country that may be labeled as an "also ran" in the race for democracy in the region. The need for a strong majority increased, as well as for a strong state and strong political leadership. Many came to believe the following: "we do not know what is to come, but because what we have now cannot continue, bring on the unknown!"

The Orbán System and the Crisis of Hungarian Democracy

Despite the serious structural problems described above, for twenty years the Hungarian political system was a liberal democracy characterized by a multiparty system, free elections, representational government, strong opposition, free media, strong and credible institutions that protected the rule of law (i.e., the Constitutional Court and the Ombudsman's Office), and independent courts. Barring a few striking exceptions, human rights were generally respected, and religious freedoms were not restricted. During the two decades after 1989, incumbent governments had lost every election (with the exception of 2006), the media criticized politicians heavily,

democracy was consolidated, and in 2004 Hungary joined the European Union. The above-discussed problems notwithstanding, Hungary remained until relatively recently (until the eve of 2006) a success story of democratic consolidation.

By 2011, however, Hungarian society was forced to realize that the system that had become increasingly freer over the decades had come to a standstill, and it was turning autocratic. This raises the following questions: Is it possible to roll back history? Is it possible to return to an autocratic system as a fully-fledged member of the European Union?

Conceptual Underpinnings

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's policies are based on the pillars of "national unification," the "central arena of power," the change of the elites, power politics, and the era of "revolutionary circumstances."

First: almost all of Orbán's important messages are based on the notion of "national unification," which has both symbolic and literal importance. He expressly criticizes the Treaty of Trianon that concluded World War I, as well as the legacy of the Communist system and the forces of globalization, which together he takes to be the most important political issues of the day. Orbán suggests that the "nation" serves as the bastion that offers protection against these forces. The idea of national unification furthermore maintains that Hungarians living outside of Hungary are not minorities, but full members of the Hungarian nation with corresponding rights and privileges. As such, these Hungarians are now granted Hungarian citizenship upon request, regardless of where they live, and thus they are also automatically granted voting rights. Orbán believes that the civic right to freedom, membership in the European Union, and being a political ally of the West are only important insofar as these do not contradict the priorities of "national unification." Concerning domestic politics, "national unification" refers to the "system of national cooperation" introduced by Orbán, which has emerged as an alternative to liberal democracy. However, the priorities of Orbán's "system" are not to improve the livelihood of the poor, the marginalized, and the Roma communities, nor does it encompass the concept of the republic and the respect for social and cultural diversity. Through his words, Orbán wishes to give the impression of uniting the nation, yet the reality is that his words divide society. In his dictionary, the term "people" is defined not as the masses, but instead represents a national-historical category.

Second, Orbán's notion of a "central arena of power" eliminates the idea of competition endorsed during the transition to democracy. He wants to create a system based on the monopolization of the most important elements of political power. If from the above-mentioned three components of liberal democracy the option of competition is removed (through the modification of electoral laws) and the institutions that safeguard the rule of law are destroyed, hardly anything is left of democracy. That which remains resonates from the era of state Socialism: the "people's

democracy.” Orbán does not need economic, cultural, and political alternatives; he strives to establish a unitary, dominant system of values (i.e., his own system of values). Yet where no alternatives exist, there is no room for democracy either.

Third, Fidesz radically changed the elites by replacing top administrative, economic, and cultural leaders tied to the experience of previous decades. The first Orbán administration had used culture to strengthen its own power; by contrast, the second Orbán administration saw culture as a source of unnecessary costs and potential criticism—and it wanted to eliminate both. It did not engage in a cultural battle because it did not want to argue; rather, it simply changed the elites. The aim here was to dismantle the political independence of institutions and to put a group of Orbán loyalists in key positions. Anti-Communism was the ideology bolstering this move, which today is no more than a “cover” for this quest for power. This endeavor to solidify clientelism sent the message that life outside the “system of national cooperation” was unthinkable.

Fourth, the government’s policies were not based on any single ideology, because according to the prime minister, the era of ideologies has ended. Viktor Orbán is in no way a conservative thinker; he is simply an opportunistic politician. Instead of ideas, Orbán believes in maximizing power. For Orbán, it is not freedom, but a tight-fisted leader who can assure order. Moreover, Orbán believes that he embodies the traditional, patriarchal values of hundreds of thousands of rural Hungarians. Those who identify with this mindset are individuals who are servile towards their superiors, but stamp upon their own employees. There are also those individuals who are only obedient towards their superiors if they feel that they are under their watchful gaze.

Fifth, Orbán interpreted his electoral victory as “revolutionary.” This allowed Orbán, with a two-thirds parliamentary majority in hand, to employ exceptional methods by making claims to exceptional circumstances (i.e., “revolutionary conditions”). As a result, Orbán deployed warlike, offensive tactics, pushing legislation through parliament that quickly and systematically rebuilt the entire public legal system. Fidesz often refers to the ideas espoused in the 1848 Revolution led by Lajos Kossuth (i.e., “revolution and struggle for freedom”); however, Fidesz’s own “revolutionary struggle” has undermined freedom. In its stead, Fidesz has established a single-party state, where power rests with the party and the prime minister himself. At this moment, there are no powerful groups within the party critical of Orbán who could offer political alternatives. As such, the will of the leader is largely binding and faces no internal limits.

The Building Blocks of the System

Though Fidesz was silent during its 2010 campaign about the most important tasks that it would need to carry out after its anticipated victory, once in power,

Orbán began constructing a new system to replace the “turbulent decades” of liberal democracy. As a first step, he issued the “declaration of national cooperation,” making it obligatory to post this declaration on the walls of all public institutions. The essence of the new system is that anyone can be a part of “national cooperation” who agrees with the government. However, those who disagree cannot be a part of the system, because the system is based on submission to the ruling party.

The government majority, upon Orbán’s recommendation, chose not to reappoint László Sólyom as president of the republic, an individual who while previously making significant pro-Fidesz moves, nevertheless guarded the autonomy of the presidency. Servile Pál Schmitt, a former presidential member of Fidesz and European Parliament representative, was appointed instead. In addition, the new government saw the 1989 Constitution as a heap of purely technical rules, which Orbán has since shaped to fit the needs of his current political agenda. If any of his new laws proved to be unconstitutional, it was not the law, but the Constitution that had to be changed. An extreme example of this was when the parliamentary majority in July 2010 enshrined the concept of “decent morality” into the Constitution, which in November was subsequently removed. Meanwhile, it cited “decent morality” only when it suited its interests. As such, this amendment sent the message that in the name of the “majority” the concept of “decent morality” can be modified at any time.

When in the autumn of 2010 the Constitutional Court repealed a statute that had retroactive effects which it found to be unconstitutional, Fidesz immediately retaliated by amending the Constitution and limiting the Constitutional Court’s jurisdiction. Thus, the Constitutional Court overnight turned from being a controlling body, a real check of the legislature, into a feeble controller of the application of the law. The chairperson of the Constitutional Court hitherto had been chosen by the members from within their own rank; however, according to the new rules, it was parliament that was to appoint him or her. In addition, the number of judges was increased from eleven to fifteen, and the Court was packed with right-wing personalities and former politicians known to be close to Fidesz. The governmental majority did not (despite the longstanding criticism of the rule) do away with the possibility of reappointing the judges, and hence they may continue to be kept under check politically.

The propaganda of the government aims to equate Fidesz voters with “the people.” Thus it justifies the arbitrary decisions of the government by referring to the “mandate” it has from voters. Public institutions, for instance, have been renamed “government” institutions. Furthermore, the Orbán administration has introduced laws that have made the immediate dismissal of public employees without cause possible, and so, too, the cleansing of the entire government apparatus. As a result, central and local public administration have quickly become politicized, riddled with conflicts of interest. All important positions, including those in the independent institutions, have been filled with Fidesz cadres. For the position of attorney general, they appointed a cadre who had previously been a Fidesz political candidate, and

who subsequently, during the first Orbán government, was the “trusted candidate” for the job. As president of the Court of Auditors they appointed a person who until May 2010 had worked as a Fidesz parliamentary representative. Another former Fidesz representative became the president of the Media Authority, and the spouse of an influential Fidesz representative was appointed to head of the newly created National Judicial Office, which serves as the administrative body of the judicial branch. Similarly, the Hungarian Financial Supervisory Authority and the Budgetary Council came under political party influence. A Fidesz politician became the president of the National Cultural Fund, who simultaneously serves as the president of the Parliamentary Cultural Committee, and, for this reason, the person oversees his own job. A right-leaning government official took charge of the ombudsman office, thus forever doing away with the independence of the institution. Most of the above-listed cadres have been appointed for nine to twelve years. Therefore, they can stall or indeed prevent subsequent governments from implementing policies that go against those of the current one.

The members of the executive and President Pál Schmitt competed over who would become the most effective “engine” of legislation. They imposed a retroactive, 98 percent punitive tax on individuals linked to the previous governments. Moreover, they launched a central campaign against certain former politicians, members of the government or office-holders, as well as left-wing and liberal intellectuals, with the aim of criminalizing them. The state-sponsored television news reports increasingly started to resemble criminal shows. Instead of political debates, for example, they broadcast news of denunciations. Furthermore, the attorney general accused former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány with influence peddling (a statutory crime). Another example is the smear campaign that was launched against the philosophers and employees of the former Budapest School, who were accused of having received too much support for their research.⁴ These latter accusations had strong anti-Semitic undertones.

State-backed media replaced public radio and television channels. Their programs heavily under-represented opposition politicians and intellectuals leaning towards the opposition. The media laws of 2010 created a media supervisory authority, and the individuals who are in the decision-making positions of this body are all close to Fidesz. The media authority can issue financial penalties at its discretion not only to radio or television programs that fail to abide by the media laws, but also to print or electronic media, and even to bloggers. The sum of the penalties can be so high as to be capable of silencing media outlets completely. The government does all it can to influence the media, ranging from personnel policies through to state-led advertising, and facilitated by the fact that the Hungarian language media market is relatively small and can be fairly easily shaped by financial means. Measures aimed to curtail press freedom, such as controlling the policies of news agencies and state television, the editing culture of even outright forgery and manipulation, as well as the mass

dismissal of employees created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among journalists and television reporters. As a response to the introduction of the media law, the European Parliament stated that these laws violated press freedom. Widespread European protests ensued. Under pressure from the European Commission, the Hungarian government withdrew some of the provisions of the media law, and the Constitutional Court repealed some of the other provisions; however, the possibility of limiting the freedom of the press remains on the books. The broadcasting operations of Budapest's last opposition radio station, *Klubrádió*, were suspended. In its aftermath, television reporters carried out a hunger strike, calling for honest and transparent public media to be restored.

The minimal requirement of every democracy is holding free and fair elections, which allows for a peaceful change of the government, which enables an incoming government to implement policies that are very different from the ones of its predecessor. After coming to power, the Fidesz government filled the National Electoral Commission, the body which is responsible for conducting clean and smooth elections, with its own people. The government majority, shortly before the municipal elections of Fall 2010, changed the electoral laws to make it more difficult for smaller parties to gain seats in local government. New laws have been passed to govern the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2014. This will mean—under the pretext of aiming to reduce the differences between the number of voters among the electoral districts—a change to a one-round system and a complete redrawing of the electoral districts according to partisan interests (i.e., gerrymandering). That said, the boundaries of electoral districts are drawn to make the left-wing districts more populous than those of the right, to ensure that the votes from the left count for less. Until now, only those parties who lost an election could receive compensation for the votes cast for the losing candidates; however, from now on, winning parties will also receive additional parliamentary seats as “compensation.” The mixed system in place since the 1989 Hungarian Electoral Law will remain⁵; however, the proportionality of the system will further decrease. The total number of parliamentary representatives will radically decrease and there will be fewer and larger electoral districts.

Overall, the new electoral law aims to filter out smaller parties and political opponents. Meanwhile, Hungary is becoming one of Europe's least proportionate electoral systems, by aiming to maintain the five percent threshold to enter parliament, and by increasing the number of representatives to be elected in the individual districts to the detriment of the spots to be gained for votes cast to party lists. The goal of the new law is to increase the chances of Fidesz to win an election, which it hopes to achieve by reducing the electoral campaign period, removing policy issues from elections, and mobilizing voters to keep presumable opposition voters away from polling stations. The proposed electoral procedures in the law wish to tie the participation in an election to previous permanent addresses, which would affect the lower tiers of society, especially the Roma and the poor (i.e., the victims of the

policies of the Fidesz administration), diminishing their opportunities to participate in elections.

Snapshot of Society and Political Culture

By introducing a flat tax system, the government made clear that its social policies are intended to support the national bourgeoisie and upper middle classes rather than the lower middle classes and the poor. The original goal of the government was to make Hungary competitive amongst other Central European countries that have lower tax rates. However, the result of all of this was a substantial budgetary deficit, which the government tried to reduce by levying “crisis” taxes on banks and telecommunications companies, alongside a 98 percent penal tax, which was levied on severance payments and which cannot be reconciled with the concept of rule of law. In addition, the government increased sales taxes to 27 percent, the highest rate in Europe, nationalized private pension funds, and withdrew millions that had been spent in the areas of culture, health care, education, and welfare.

Fidesz’s sweeping electoral victory at first sight seemed to many a populist reaction to previous “weak” governments. After all, Fidesz promoted economic nationalism and “unorthodox” economic policies by levying taxes on banks, launching anti-bank campaigns, and attacking foreign investors and multinational financial institutions. In an effort to balance the budget, the government levied “crisis taxes” on banks and primarily foreign-owned large companies. At first sight, these measures may appear as typically “left wing” economic policies; however, this is a misleading interpretation, because Fidesz’s “unorthodox” economic policies were complemented with distinctly “anti-Socialist” social policies, as it were. For example, the government now grants tax benefits to families of working parents with children, which means that by definition families where the parents are unemployed and who live in deep poverty (most notably the Roma) are excluded. Social spending on the homeless and the unemployed has been decreased. What is more, homelessness has been criminalized. The timeframe for disbursing aid has been reduced, meaning that recipients should receive aid quicker; however, more money has been allocated to those mothers who temporarily leave the job market to remain at home with their child. These measure have been justified with the notion of traditional, patriarchal family values. The Orbán administration openly defends its anti-Socialist policies, and this is rare on continental Europe, where the majority of countries since World War II have aimed foremost to establish a social market economy, which they have since labored to protect.

The private pension insurance system was nationalized in such a way that people were left with no other rational choice but to move back into the state-supported pension system. By absorbing these pension funds, in 2010 the government was able to meet the Maastricht criterion of 3 percent annual budget deficit (which nonetheless turned out to be 4.2 percent). One year later, the government forced even those who had chosen to remain in the private system into the state pension system. By this

point, there was no question of a “freedom of choice”: the government behaved like a cop turned thief: it put its hands on the wealth of the people. Thus, in Hungary the basic principles of constitutional law, such as the respect of private property, the freedom of contract, and legal certainty came into question. Whilst the government’s propaganda played anti-EU tunes, it designed measures to reduce costs, following EU directives, all in the name of the “economic crisis.” The leaders of the government launched a verbal crusade, lambasting the sins of economic neoliberalism, by promising a “national rebirth”; however, in reality, the government itself was carrying out neoliberal policies, and the sole purpose of these policies was to protect and benefit its own elites and a narrow class of people.

The government took several steps to prevent people from expressing opposition or dissatisfaction in a formal and organized fashion: it made the Labor Code more strict, which hurt workers, and it abolished traditional forms of dialogue between employers and employees. Moreover, unions were forced to merge with an emerging corporate structure. Limiting union rights curtailed the rights of workers to call for a strike. Furthermore, government-supported media outlets launched a smear campaign against the new, more radical generation of union leaders.

Shortly after coming to power, the government established a new, so-called “Counter-Terrorist Center,” partly to guarantee the personal safety of the new prime minister. The annual budget of the organization exceeds the amount set aside for the National Cultural Fund. One year after, it seems that the strengthened security services cannot sufficiently guarantee the safety of those in power, either. The Minister of Interior has proposed to establish a new secret service, though this is still under debate in the cabinet; because leaders in power could keep other parties in check via this service, this measure has (understandably) aroused controversy.

The new law ensures that public education is managed and controlled by the central government. Local government and foundation schools are being nationalized, and a significant number of these schools are being placed in the hands of churches. Moreover, through these new laws the government is homogenizing the curriculum of public schools, and it has reduced the age until which students must attend school from eighteen to sixteen years. The law on public education merges the anti-liberal traditions enshrined in the dogmas of Communism and Catholicism; it is no longer about education, but rather about discipline, and it declares that the state has the right to intervene in the lives of children and parents. The self-proclaimed “family-friendly” government strives to “re-educate” families for them to become “worthy” of participating in the system of national cooperation. Similar patterns can be observed in higher education. The proposed new bill on higher education aims to radically limit the number of students that can be accepted to universities and colleges with financial aid from the state. The new laws would even require that students retroactively repay tuition fees should they choose to live abroad after completing their studies. On top of it all, the Orbán government proposes that some university degrees can only be

pursued upon payment of full tuition, which will make the more lucrative professions available to only the wealthy. It is the unspoken goal of the government to reduce social mobility, to bring the process of change of the elite to a close, and to “finally” entrench the social hierarchy that has emerged through a “revolutionary” process in the post-Communist era.

The government is paying special attention to the members of the national bourgeoisie and is placing high expectations on these individuals to carry out certain functions. The Orbán system creates incentives through tax breaks for popular team sports, such as football, the prime minister’s favorite. Sándor Csányi, the CEO of OTP Bank, became the president of the Hungarian Football Association, and millionaire Tamás Leisztinger, who had strong ties to the left, was “encouraged” to become the president of the DVTK, another football club. The “team of the political regime” was Honvéd in the 1950s; now it is Videoton, a club based in the city of Székesfehérvár. Government and party officials regularly attend Videoton’s home games, observing from the grandstand (today this seating is referred to as the “VIP box”). The government announced its plans for building a state stadium. It has spent hundreds of millions of forints on football academies, such as the Puskás Academy, which has ties to Orbán.

Though the government stresses that it does not wish to return to the past, it nonetheless feeds nostalgia for the period between 1920 and 1944, characterized by Admiral Miklós Horthy’s nationalist and revanchist policies. Prime Minister Orbán has proclaimed the day of the Trianon Peace Treaty that concluded World War I as the “day of national unity.” The government is politically absolving individuals extolled during the Horthy regime by conferring new awards upon them. Under the guise of “national unification,” Orbán is granting citizenship and voting rights to Hungarian minorities living outside of Hungary to increase the number of right-wing voters, given that the majority living in the diaspora tend to vote for the right-wing parties (and will perhaps return the favor for receiving the automatic right to Hungarian citizenship). Orbán declared that he wishes to politically deal with the extreme-right party, Jobbik, the same way that Horthy dealt with Nazi Nyilas (Arrow Cross) movements back in the day: “give them two slaps on the face and send them home.” Meanwhile, various extremist right, paramilitary organizations have appeared in villages across Hungary, bearing a range of eerie names, such as “Magyar Gárda” (“Hungarian Guard”), “Véderő” (“Protective Force”), and “Betyársereg” (“Outlaw’s Army”). These organizations take away the government’s monopoly on force and launch racist campaigns aimed to intimidate the Roma. Courts that ban these extremist paramilitary groups are unable to prevent them from reorganizing under different banners.

In the area of culture, the policies of Fidesz and Jobbik overlap: both have an exclusionary interpretation of the idea of “national values.” Under this label, both parties go against the equal opportunities policy of recent years. Though the government protected the National Theater’s director against homophobic and

extreme-right attacks, compensation to the right was not long to come. In exchange, they appointed an extreme-right-wing actor as director of the New Theater, where he will now be working alongside István Csurka, the former President of Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja (MIÉP) (“Hungarian Truth and Life Party”), a former extreme-right party. To the helm of the Opera, Orbán (deceiving his own minister) placed a government commissioner, who through his deeds and declarations would within a few weeks come into confrontation with the major representatives of Europe’s cultural scene. Within a year and a half, all theater directors across Hungary were replaced. In many towns, relatives of the Fidesz clientele have become the directors of the theaters. By stopping the activities of the public foundation for film, the government in effect ended one of the most successful branches of Hungarian cultural life: film production. Thus, producers dependent on the government have secured the “right to the last cut,” and as such, censorship in filmmaking has become institutionalized yet again. The government even decides which religion is “established” (Islam and Mormonism, for instance, are not), and it has the authority to conduct a complete data search on all “non-established” congregations.

The Orbán regime considers some of the most outstanding artists and scholars to be its enemies, including the pianist András Schiff, writer Imre Kertész, conductors Ádám Fischer and Iván Fischer, filmmaker Béla Tarr, economist János Kornai, sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge, philosophers Ágnes Heller, Mihály Vajda, Sándor Radnóti, and many others. The government had requested some of its artist friends to create illustrations for the new basic law, so that it may leave visual footprints of the historical periods of its preference next to the text, displayed on the mandatory “basic law tables” in government offices. They are redesigning Kossuth Square, the large area just in front of the Parliament, to restore the “conditions of 1944.” Their actions are full of contradictions: they simultaneously laud Chinese Communism and the anti-Communist neoconservatism in the United States; they banned pro-Tibet protests during the Chinese Communist Party Chairman’s visit and at the same time put up a statue of President Ronald Reagan, who had called Communism the “Evil Empire.” They turn away from previous symbolic figures of Hungarian democracy, such as István Bibó and Imre Nagy, turning instead towards the successors of Li Peng, with whom they “forge an alliance.” In addition, they declare that the Communist Party of the past is a “criminal organization,” including its predecessor and successor organizations; however, they welcome the former members of the Communist party in the government; what is more, they have these former members write parts of the basic law.

The central propaganda machine rises to protect nationalism, patriarchal family values, power politics, and “law and order.” The Criminal Code has also been modified so that teenagers can now be thrown behind bars for minor retail theft or painting graffiti. The independence of the justice system has also suffered: the government is making the Office of the Attorney General dependent upon personal loyalties; it is

curbing the rights of lawyers in criminal proceedings; and by forcing early retirement upon Supreme Court judges, it is launching a siege against the courts. When it created the “Kúria” (i.e., the supreme court in Hungary before the judicial system was reorganized after World War II), it did not extend the term of the president of the Supreme Court (though his mandate had not yet expired). Instead, the government replaced the president with a cadre loyal to Fidesz. In 2010, the Fidesz majority in parliament changed the Constitution nine times in a six-month period. Thus, the government itself placed the principle of legal uncertainty under doubt, shaking its own credibility.

It was surprising that—despite its qualified majority in parliament—the steps of the Fidesz government are followed by blitzkrieg tactics, especially where legislation is concerned. If a government announcement of a new law is expected, parts of it are leaked days before, and thus the government can “prepare” public opinion for its receipt. Thereafter, the party’s parliamentary faction leader, or the prime minister’s spokespersons, duly delivers the announcement, which is then immediately submitted to parliament, and, by way of an individual representative’s motion, the bill is voted into law. The Minister of Justice, who in theory should be responsible for legislation, in effect has no say in the legislative process. There is no society-wide debate, no professional talks, no impact assessments, and there is no need for other such procedures considered “orthodox” in a democracy. The opposition’s voice is divided and it does not filter through the state-sponsored media. Furthermore, a modification of house rules limits parliamentary debate explicitly: proposals deemed important by Fidesz pass through parliament smoothly. This clearly contradicts the notion of a parliamentary democracy, which is based on the idea of holding public debates. During the past year and a half analysts, journalists, and commentators hopelessly chased after events as they unfolded; the remaining democrats could barely keep track of this chaotic pace of legislation, which had been intentionally accelerated. By the time the involved parties and non-state-controlled media outlets realized what had happened, the event had already concluded.

On first sight, this raid tactic gave the impression of a government determined to govern. Yet what has become clear is that the determination of the government is to centralize power. When criticized, the government has regularly responded by saying that the “most important talks” with society had already taken place, namely at the polling stations in 2010. As such, the government claims that its policies reflect the will of the people. Yet what is not clear is the following: if it is true that the majority stands behind the government, why does the government have to govern in a coup-like fashion? Because there is no denying that between 2010 and 2011, a constitutional coup unfolded in Hungary, and the speed of this coup was dictated by Viktor Orbán and his cronies.

The icing on the constitutional coup was the approval of the new basic law. Armed with a qualified majority in parliament, Orbán provided only two months for parliament and society to deliberate the issue. The democratic opposition parties, MSZP and LMP (the Hungarian Socialist Party and *Lehet Más a Politika*, or “Politics Can Be Different,” respectively) were not included in the parliamentary debate. However, Jobbik did participate, though in the end it voted against the new basic law. Under the label “society-wide debate,” Fidesz circulated a survey. Professionally speaking, this survey was of low quality and impossible to process. That said, Fidesz called this survey a “national consultation.” Only a fraction of voters responded to the survey.

The Constitution approved by governmental majority in April 2011 was the result of a unilateral governmental process which did not reflect a national consensus—because Fidesz did nothing to reach such a consensus. The new text kept several portions of the 1989 Constitution; however, it “protects” individual freedoms by lumping them together with communal interests, and as such, it does not in fact value individual freedoms. The basic law openly refers to Hungary as a country based on Christian values, and this is not only an exception for Europe, but also unusual among the neighboring Visegrád countries. Though the basic law (in one sentence only) formally maintains the form of a republic, it breaks with the essential notion of a republic, by changing the name from “Republic of Hungary” to simply “Hungary.” The new basic law increases the role of religion, traditions, and the so-called national values. It speaks of a unified nation, yet certain social minorities are not mentioned with the same degree of importance. In its definition of equality before the law, it mentions gender, ethnicity, and religion, yet it does not extend this definition to include legal protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The 1989 democratic Constitution was ideologically neutral; by contrast, that of 2011 replaces the two preambles of the 1989 text with one of the longest preambles in Europe, composed of a whopping twenty-six paragraphs. This serves as an expression of a “national religious belief system”; it is a vow in which the Hungarians list all of their sources of pride and hope and pledge to join hands and build a better future, parallel to Orbán’s “system of national cooperation.”

The idea of a “national faith” has a selective and biased take on Hungarian history. It does not contain any references to the 1848 Revolution, the first democratic republic of 1918, the “small Constitution” of the Republic of 1946, nor to the Constitutional revolution of 1989. St. Stephen has become the positive figure of Hungarian history, as has the turn towards Christianity, the 1956 Revolution, as well as the parliamentarians who were elected during the first free elections on May 2, 1990. It is unusual that the preamble speaks about the negative periods of Hungarian history as well, among which it mentions the German occupation that began on March 19, 1944, the Nazi and the Communist periods, and the 1949 Communist Constitution. The preamble of the basic law simply “removes” the period between 1944 and 1990 from Hungarian

history and establishes that it does not accept legal continuity with this era.

Fidesz sees the history of Hungary as a menu from which it can select items to suit its tastes. This arbitrary and voluntaristic approach to history undoubtedly characterizes all revolutions. For example, during the French Revolution, the names of the months of the year were changed and a “revolutionary calendar” was introduced. Yet the current, belated “revolutionariness” is led by retroactive, psychological need for some kind of compensation. Breaking with the legal continuity of the past is absurd for a number of reasons; among others, one has to note that the new basic law gains its legitimacy in part from the 1989 Constitution.

The new text stresses the role of Christianity in gluing the nation together, which is debatable in a largely secular country; it does not respect the belief system of other religions, and it only respects the “traditions” of other religions. Therefore, it views them as important to the extent that they form part of Hungary’s history. The wording of the new basic law says a lot about contemporary Hungarian politics: it speaks extensively about Christianity, taking sides with the founder of the state, St. Stephen, who promoted European integration and took sides with the West, vis-à-vis General Koppány, who remained a “euro-skeptic” (the two were in conflict over a thousand years ago). This may in effect be a positive aspect of the new law. However, the text visibly turns its back on atheists and agnostics, who, because they were (supposedly) unable to contribute intellectually to Hungarian national culture, have been shut out of the system. The text sees “culture” as synonymous with the unified and indivisible Hungarian national culture, because the notion of cultural pluralism does not even emerge.

The ideas of democracy, republic, and human rights are missing from the preamble of the new basic law; however, the traditional notion of the “true rule of the people” appears, which is not based on rights, but on duties of the state. The text is classically Orbánian in its ending: “We, the citizens of Hungary stand prepared to base our country’s order on national cooperation.” Since no one knows for sure what the “system of national cooperation” is exactly, it is Orbán himself, as chief leader, who is entitled to determine how it is to be interpreted.

The text turns away from the ideals of democracy, republic, and freedom, and turns toward a world based on the state, the nation, system cooperation, an indivisible national culture, and Christianity. Emphasis shifts from rights toward obligations. The opening statement of the U.S. Constitution is *We, the People*, but its Hungarian counterpart quotes the nineteenth-century poet Ferenc Kölcsey’s thought *God Bless the Hungarians!*, a verse from the Hungarian national anthem. The signing of the new basic law took place on the first anniversary of the electoral victory of Fidesz on Easter Monday 2011, which blasphemously claimed to symbolize the “rise” of Christianity in Hungary. All of this drew bizarre parallels between the rise of Jesus and the new Fidesz Constitution, which also made it clear how one is to interpret the “separation” of church and state in Hungary today.

Power and Society

During his first administration between 1998 and 2002, Prime Minister Orbán was more *primus inter pares* in his leadership; today, by contrast, the informal center of power, composed of the prime minister, his advisors, and Fidesz cronies, simply nod in agreement with the decisions of the “system’s founding father.” For Fidesz, the “center of power” serves the purpose of limiting the possibility of democratic elections in every way possible. With its tendency to adopt the “worst practices” in Europe, it aims to lengthen its own rule. Concerning the government’s mandate, it was Orbán’s explicit goal to create additional qualified majority rules, which has killed off the possibility for a change of government. And even if a change in government did take place, the administration strives to ensure that the would-be new government cannot carry out policies that contradict its own. Furthermore, the Orbán cabinet has restricted the right to strike and the rights of employees; it has reduced the rights to assembly, religious freedoms, educational freedoms, and social rights. Rather than maintaining the system of local government, the Orbán administration, after restricting the resources of local governments, places the majority of their functions under the jurisdiction of the central government.

The Fidesz government promised that after gaining its exceptional majority in government it would take on the fight against poverty and the social crisis. It promised jobs, order, and security. It suggested that although some of its measures would be controversial from a rule of law perspective, it would in turn guarantee economic and social development. Millions believed this promise. Perhaps they thought that certain democratic practices could be sacrificed in exchange for economic well-being. Now, however, one observes the following: the government has dismantled the limits on the rule of law and it has bid farewell to liberal democracy; yet, in return, not only did it fail to lessen the social burden of the Hungarian population, it has sent the cynical message that it has (and had) no intention of doing this. Thus, it opened the avenue for the rise of the extreme-right party Jobbik.

Despite the destructive efforts of the government, Hungary at the beginning of 2012 still retains a few of the basic characteristics of a multiparty democracy. Liberal democracy, however, has been replaced with a wrecked version of “majority” rule, renamed “the majority,” where the freedom of speech is limited by self-censorship (people do not speak up, for fear of losing their jobs) and press freedom is clearly being reduced to the blogosphere. The state-run television channels have taken a turn towards the tabloid. The aim is to depoliticize the news or remove political issues from media reports. State-sponsored media outlets, for instance, either did not report or underreported the anti-Orbán mass rallies and demonstrations. There is no denying that during the next general elections, Fidesz will have a clear advantage.

To ensure that elections continue to be fair and free and to guarantee a return towards liberal democracy, strong opposition parties are needed that are willing to cooperate, along with social movements and an independent press, civic

organizations, and heightened international attention. By the end of 2011, the main points of opposition had already begun to appear, including independent unions and increasingly active civic groups that overshadow the dispersed opposition parties, which today remain unable to join forces.

In January 10, 2011, the group entitled “One million people for the freedom of the press!” sent 10,000 protestors to the streets; by March 15, and October 23, two of Hungary’s most important national holidays, their number had swollen to 30,000 and 70,000, respectively. Labor unions organized larger gatherings in April and June. On October 1, the Hungarian Solidarity Movement was formed, which organized a demonstration of 30,000 people in front of parliament, and in December it announced that it would become a countrywide organization. On Christmas 2011, representatives and activists of the opposition Green party (LMP) chained themselves around the parliament building to prevent parliamentarians from entering. They aimed to draw attention to the legislation that was being passed by parliament that threatened the rule of law. The police, Ukrainian- and Belorussian-style, accused the protestors of “restricting personal freedoms.” On January 2, 2012, about 100,000 people protested against the new Constitution and the rise of autocracy.

If society is unable to balance the system against governmental leadership, democracy is in danger. The proponents of autocracy, however, can hardly cement their power and they cannot stop the clock, adjusting the present moment, which is favorable for them, for eternity. It is an important lesson for those who believe in democracy: they cannot pretend as though all is well, as they have in the past decades.

History does not end with the transition to democracy. Democracy is never a complete condition; rather, it is a dynamic process, full of tension. In essence, it is but a fragile balance of forces and counter-forces. If Hungarian democracy survives these authoritarian challenges thanks to resistance from society, there is a good chance that it will subsequently be stronger than ever. The political crisis calls attention to the fact that democracy cannot be narrowed down to purely institutions, because institutions can be easily hollowed out by leaders who do not respect freedom. Democracy can only be preserved if, along with its values, a plethora of dedicated people help it thrive.

Notes

1. Fidesz (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*, Alliance of Young Democrats) was founded in 1988 as a youth anti-communist party. Now taking the name Fidesz: Hungarian Civic Union, it is the major conservative party in Hungary.
2. The reference here is not to a specific and familiar group of figures but to all those involved in making reforms to the 1949 Hungarian Constitution after 1989. Hungary was the only one of the former Eastern Bloc countries that did not adapt a new constitution—one of many preconditions for the current problems facing the country.
3. A recording made at a private meeting of Gyurcsány's MSZP party held on May 26, 2006, surfaced in the press in mid-September of that same year. Gyurcsány was heard admitting that “we have obviously been lying for the last one-and-a-half to two years.” This resulted in a series of demonstrations against the government. Even though Gyurcsány and the MSZP did not deny the veracity of the recording, the prime minister refused to resign.
4. The reference here is to a police investigation currently under way against Ágnes Heller and other left-liberal philosophers in Hungary (including Mihaly Vajda, Sándor Radnóti, and János Weiss) for misuse of public funds. A politically-motivated attack (those allegations that have been tried in court to date have ruled in Heller's favor), the charge against the philosophers has been challenged by intellectuals across the world, including Jürgen Habermas and Julian Nida-Rümelin, who published a letter in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on January 25, 2011. An English translation of the letter is available at: http://www.newappsblog.com/2011/01/translation-of-habermas-and-nida-r%C3%BCmelin-on-the-hungarian-situation.html#_ftn1
5. The Hungarian electoral system is a mix of direct election of representatives in single-seat constituencies (176 members in the National Assembly), proportional representation (152), and fifty-eight “compensation” seats, which are determined through a complex system in connection with voter turnout and votes that in each electoral round do not get counted because they do not go to the winning member. The aim of this mixed system is to try to optimally capture voter preference in the actual numbers of representations of each party in the National Assembly.