

István Hegedűs

Hungary between Despair and Protest

New Wave of Discontent Since the Collapse of the Opposition

On 5 October, on World Teachers' Day, Hungarian high-school students organised a solidarity demonstration with their teachers on the streets of Budapest and other bigger cities. Ten-thousands of people, including parents of the pupils expressed their support to the teachers who started a civil disobedience movement because of their low salaries, the under-financed education system and the centralised, old-fashioned curricula they have to present at classes. Many of the teachers received a last notice before dismissal from high ranking government officials, whilst others have been ultimately fired. In the capital, car drivers and by-passers waved and smiled friendly to the courageous representatives of a young generation.

It was high time for expressing protest against the government. Now these were not the opposition parties which mobilised their followers. Since the devastating election results on 3 April 2022, the opposition groups have been in ruins and became even more fragmented and hostile to each other than before. The new demonstrations, at least, showed that there is another Hungary, which does not accept the semi-authoritarian rule of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán without a voice. Since the defeat, the lack of political innovation and the organisational inertia inside the opposition pushed the anti-Fidesz electorate into apathy. Looking at the fresh faces of the demonstrators, a new hope has emerged that social discontent might undermine Orbán's unchallenged power sooner or later.

Actually, it seems to be rather later than sooner. Opposition candidates have hardly won some of the by-elections since the spring in spite of the record high inflation rate and the dramatic weakening of the Hungarian currency that made economic prospects shockingly gloomy for the whole population. The opposition lacks credibility, vision, and narrative, whilst facing an uneven race on the fields like access to the media, the electoral system and financial resources in a hostile domestic environment. Well, these are exactly the most well-known features of a political regime, which is not a full-fledged democracy and free society any more. Government propaganda dominates the public

discourse. Previously, the fear of migrants, a so-called “Muslim invasion” successfully seduced uncertain and less committed voters to choose strongman Orbán. Now it has been the “war between two foreign countries” that was misused by the incumbent party distributing the charges in the bigger part of the media under its full control that “the opposition wants to send our boys to Ukraine to die”. The historic legacy of anxiety about a nation that has always been a toy of big states made a lot of Hungarians believe in Orbán’s rhetoric: he urged for peace in the neighbourhood without naming and blaming the aggressor. Hungary is not Poland and anti-Russian sentiments are not built into the collective psyche: the vague memory on the heroism during the 1956 anti-Stalinist revolution and freedom fight did not inspire people to make a parallel between former Soviet and present Russian imperialisms.

Nevertheless, the huge gap that emerged at the national elections between supporters of liberal democracy and those, who might not be interested in universal political and civil rights as well as European values, probably expressed a deeper problem under the surface. Fidesz received 55 percentage of the votes and a new, openly extremist party another six, whilst the united opposition gained just 35. How can the opposition – united or not – change the outcome of the elections in four or twelve year’s ahead if the antagonism between electoral blocks seems to be frozen without any foreseeable volatility? Has the political society been fully “Orbanised” during the last twelve years under the leadership of one charismatic personality? Probably not, but the cultural-geographic polarisation has sharpened inside the country: the language used by the opposition has not reached the soul and brain of the overwhelming majority of citizens outside Budapest. Although a typical Hungarian still supports the country’s EU membership and does not lean towards extreme nationalism, centralised right-wing identity campaigns have increased distrust towards foreign elites and their domestic allies. Even if someone is not a fundamental Orbán-fan, he or she might accept the arguments that Orbán is fighting for the Hungarian interests against bigger and stronger rivals as well as the “Brussels bureaucrats”. What was more striking during the election campaign, however, that the opposition had almost nothing to speak about its political proposals whether for the first two weeks after forming a new government or in the long-run: what sort of Hungary it wants to build after replacing the current corrupt “system of national co-operation”.

Old and New Dilemmas in Hungarian Politics

Although it is evident that simple Orbán-bashing did not function at the elections, instead of working on a renewed political and ideological strategy and a search for innovations in communication technics, most of the top politicians refusing Orbán's illiberal regime have started fighting against each other once again. The most popular party amongst the weak ones, the Democratic Coalition has presented its own one-party shadow-government in order to show its strength when pushing aside the others and arguing for a left-wing alternative. The consequences of a decisive role of Ferenc Gyurcsány, the former Prime Minister, whose wife, Klára Dobrev, Member of the European Parliament, has declared herself the leader of the shadow cabinet, might be counter-productive. His popular support has been permanently very low in the huge part of the electorate since his mistakes and failures as head of government between 2006 and 2009 as well as due to the character-killing charges widespread by his archenemy in the public spheres. Moreover, he is not liked by Momentum, the liberal-centrist political party of the younger generation, either. The logic of election mathematics would force all political actors on the anti-Orbán side to co-operate with each other one day again. Still, at the moment, the fragmentation of the opposition parties and the lack of fresh, alternative ideas have widened Orbán's room of manoeuvre even more than ever before domestically.

If not the Hungarian opposition, can global liberal-minded political elites stop and block Orbán? His twelve years long radical adventurism (after a first cycle in government between 1998 and 2002) made the once young liberal politician a trouble-maker and an international hero on the very right side of the political spectrum. His ideological statements and illiberal experiments in the Hungarian "laboratory" - within the European Union - gave him special media attention ever since he first wanted to place free media under strict control in 2010 provoking the outbreak of his regime's first European borderless scandal. The last twelve years can be summarised as an ongoing hesitation of liberal democrats what to do with a Member State which continuously breaches shared European norms and practices. It took about a decade for the centre-right party family, the European People's Party to draw the conclusion that not everything belongs together what had grown together before. In the meantime, however, Orbán successfully deconstructed liberal democracy at home and the overall embarrassment inside the European Union how to react both politically and in legal terms helped him to implement his sovereigntist agenda.

One of the key features in Orbán's personal strategy was to become a strongman beyond his national territory, who even influences and changes global history in spite of the relative insignificance of his homeland as a world player. There was a chance at the peak of the refugee crisis – in the time of the “Muslim invasion” in his own words – when Orbán seemed to grow up as a potential rival leader to Angela Merkel and offered a competing ideology and program to her moderate, humanist political approach. International tendencies seemed to push him ahead when old elites have lost confidence after the tragedy of Brexit and the catastrophic victory of Trump at the US presidential elections. Still, the openly victorious Hungarian leader falsely prophesied the general riot of the people worldwide for the year 2017. As political winds have changed their directions once again, Orbán lost ground. His original concept that he could use the European Union as a cash machine – now his critics unmasked him without any further hesitation - but can neglect common rules and procedures in the same time has been already strengthened with a second pillar. Orbán gradually developed a megalomaniac vision that he plays the fool with Brussels whilst he becomes a close friend of Eastern dictators, especially the Russian authoritarian leader in order to make himself an independent, autonomous global actor. Although there are rumours that Putin can blackmail the Hungarian statesman with old “kompromat” from the communist times, it is much more likely that Orbán convinced himself about the political and economic advantages of his own genius *Sonderweg* in the international arena. He would have never accepted the position to be a lieutenant of any big powers. Just the contrary; he wanted to pull all the strings of his puppets. What he was able to do instead; it has been a pathetic dance within the European Union and NATO decision-making institutions that has gradually isolated him whilst his partners look at him with distrust or worse. Actually, the new quest for qualified majority voting in the Council has been strengthened because of the repeated vetoes of the Hungarian representatives. The Hungarian Prime Minister even lost the admiration of the populist right wing Polish ruling party, PiS. The Visegrad cooperation has not developed into a region where a “cultural counter-revolution” against the West would have emerged in Orbán's vision: the V4 is now in a sclerotic state.

Critical Juncture

Although Orbán's government supported - with some hesitations - all EU sanctions against Russia, at home the Prime Minister blames the common

measures as the only reasons of high energy costs. He even demands that the European Union should simply decrease prices. In the meantime, Orbán has no other choice but to fulfil the criteria of the conditionality mechanism approved by the European institutions he was not able to block, just to postpone them for a while at the end of 2020. In order to receive the necessary transfers to the Hungarian economy from the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Hungarian Parliament with its overwhelming, two-third Fidesz majority desperately voted in favour of new laws, which are supposed to ensure transparency and fair competition with the help of independent institutions. Orbán might be stopped to enrich his friendly oligarchs from the European budget first time in more than a decade.

Nevertheless, protecting the financial interests of European taxpayers will not transform the nature of the illiberal Hungarian political and economic model into a liberal democratic system in itself. Also, enthusiastic street demonstrations in the bigger cities might not convince the pro-Fidesz part of the electorate to change its mind and look for another option. Civic activism and romanticism should go hand in hand with the renewal of the partisan offer inside the opposition in a parliamentary democracy. In principle, the growing economic and moral pressures of European institutions, member state governments on the defiant Hungarian leader gives a proper chance to the critics of Orbanism to elaborate attractive non-populist messages and programs in order to seduce new voters as well as to better organise themselves. Hungarian opposition politicians and representatives of civil society should not only alarm citizens that Hungary is not on the right side of history once again, but they need to spread fresh hope that only common European solutions can solve or mitigate the current global, national, local and individual problems of the people. Probably, this will be a long march, but Orbán's regime will not stand for ever.