



The Renewal of Liberal Democracy: Strategy, Vision, Competition, Parties, Civil Society

- summary of a Hungarian experts' workshop organised by the Hungarian Europe Society, 20 April 2023 -

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During this event, the invited analysts discussed questions about the extent to which the Hungarian illiberal, authoritarian populist system has consolidated thirteen years after Viktor Orbán's election victory in 2010 as well as the chances of the democratic-liberal opposition parties and civil society organisations to renew themselves in order to achieve a political turnaround in Hungary. There was a consensus on the need for a strategic renewal of the mindset, behaviour, methods and techniques of political actors opposed to radical right-wing populism and the hybrid system created by Orbán. In light of the parliamentary elections a year ago, the dilemma of whether a return to the international community of liberal democracies will be possible at all in the near future has become even sharper.

In this summary, we quote expert opinions, findings and propositions anonymously that can and should be further discussed and debated.

I. Ideological approaches - free or forced path?

A deterministic approach is in contrast to causality: determinism would mean that something could not and cannot happen in any other way than the way it will happen in the future. If we accept that something could only have happened the way it did, then it does not really matter what the causes were. Conversely, if we believe that things have causes, they could have happened differently.

What went wrong in Hungary?

Experts have been researching what led to the current situation and where Hungarian reality stems from today. In the context of the Orbán regime, it is suggested that the migration crisis or the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 may have been the determining factors, but it certainly did not start in 2010.



What can be the main causes then?

- 1) The person of Viktor Orbán himself - basically a very talented politician, a somewhat unique phenomenon in East-Central Europe,
- 2) The Hungarian political elite has done something wrong, roughly from the time of the regime change and continuously since then.
 - checks and balances - a constitutional system was created which did not guarantee the functioning of the system of checks and balances (e.g. electoral law),
 - economic policy - neoliberalism - it is a historical coincidence that Hungary arrived to the regime change during the 1980s,
 - there is a systemic problem with Hungarian society, something culturally wrong (this is the most debatable because the people cannot be replaced): lack of trust, a sense of isolation both at individual and national level.

What could be done?

- a charismatic figure is needed who has the backing of the majority of society,
- a more inclusive economic and social system should emerge as a counter-alternative.

The situation of Hungarian liberalism

The problem with liberalism is not populism, but liberalism itself. What are the reasons behind it?

- 1.) Liberalism was once a paradigm of social theory. Its anthropological premise was the freedom of the individual as a capacity for reflection and rationality. From this came equality as a secondary premise. Many believe that this was the liberalism of the regime change, underpinned by a very elaborate economic theory.
- 2.) There was another assumption, the existence of a basic sense of community. In this, individuals do not want to run away from each other but want to agree with each other. Let's call this implicit community coherence.
- 3.) For classical liberalism, the great challenge was the democratic majoritarian and egalitarian movements (which, of course, were partly due to the success of liberalism). Liberalism had to respond to the challenges of democracy. The answer was to put rights first. The thinking was reversed: people are not inherently free and equal, as in classical liberalism, but rights make them free and equal. Thus, the liberalism of rights was born which is paternalistic.



4.) New challenges:

- a. Internal: the liberalism of rights has become elitist and prescriptive. A philosophical elite defines the rights that people are entitled to deriving from the moral principles of liberty and equality.
- b. External:
 - i. Community coherence emerges as a problem and the open society principle is only relevant in relatively closed and homogenous societies.
 - ii. Capitalism as growth and profit. Can a system based on property and the freedom of enterprise be developed?

5.) There are liberal sentiments, but no liberal theory. The populism created by those who claim to be liberal is a rather empty concept.

II. Economy, economic policy - prosperity and lagging behind

Does the dismantling of the rule of law have a negative impact on economic performance?

The answer is not clear because indicators show a different picture. In fact, Hungary's catching-up with the EU average, its economic performance after 2010 was better than before 2010. This is also true for other countries in the region, Hungary has performed at the level of the regional average and has not fallen behind.

- investment rates are exceptionally high;
- foreign investment reached a record level last year (EUR 6.5 billion);
- the share of people at risk of social exclusion, a leading indicator of poverty, has fallen markedly.

Hungary has a growth strategy that relies on attracting foreign investment and attracting firms, and it should be noted that manufacturing companies are not necessarily intimidated by an authoritarian regime. Investors do not mind if labour protection, environmental protection and subsidy rules are not necessarily governed by the rule of law.

As long as the catching-up of an economy is based on adaptation, the quality of institutions and the institutional system is less important and only becomes interesting at the point where creativity is needed. While the performance of the Hungarian economy in terms of growth and investment shows a significant performance, the same cannot be said of productivity. One possible interpretation is that while we are experiencing extensive growth (on the one hand, employment has increased and working capital has flowed into the country), government circles have parasitically taken it away. Another possible interpretation is that a peripheral, low-value-added economy faces the risk of an income trap.



What does all this mean?

- the image of a declining, impoverished Hungary is patently false;
- those opposition forces that are looking for breakthroughs by building a knowledge-based economy through quality human resource-based growth are on the right track, but creative economic policy proposals are needed.

Many thought that if a populist party came to power and started governing, it would have two alternatives:

- It will govern in a non-populist way;
- It will fail quickly because it will pursue irresponsible fiscal policies and go bankrupt.

This was a widely shared view, but it did not happen. Why not? There are three possible reasons:

- 1.) Policy content: populist governance does not necessarily imply "fiscal alcoholism" or fiscal irresponsibility, it is also possible to pursue relatively stable fiscal policies. Moreover, since classical ideological constraints are looser, there are no consistency requirements, it is "chameleon-like", and flexible in its approach to policy content. It has an extreme majoritarianism; it opposes issues of importance to (unpopular) minorities.
- 2.) Decision-making process: from the discussion of opinions, policy proposals, and ways of exploring alternatives to implementation, we can talk about inclusive or exclusive populism. It does not necessarily have to be exclusive, the many examples from Latin America show that it can be inclusive. In Hungary, however, there is exclusive populism, although the participation and access to information of experts, civil society actors, the media, etc. are limited. Rhetorically it is inclusive (see e.g. national consultation), but in reality, it does not want to channel opinions in any meaningful way, because engaging with those is not a populist activity.
- 3.) Discursive language framing:
 - a. overwhelmed with emotion;
 - b. polarising, hostile;
 - c. simplistic language and use of strategic metaphors.

What does this imply?

- technocratic specialisation is not the way forward, instead we need to be inclusive of different actors,
- the need to express policy messages and preferences in an emotive language instead of using scientific clarity,
- using strong metaphors and finding linguistic terms which voters can relate to,
- this should be paired with more progressive content,



- ideological constraints should be loosened and flexibility is needed, some elements of this flexibility should be taken over from populism.

What is wrong with the emergence of the Hungarian capitalist class and with national protectionism?

This would not be problematic up to a certain level, but in Hungary, protectionism means the rise of Lőrinc Mészáros as the closest oligarch to the Prime Minister.

In the past, oligarchs were selected on the basis of some sort of competences and by that the Hungarian system perhaps bears some resemblance to the Russian one. However, recently a new group has emerged in which this no longer matters and certain individuals are supported on a family/parental basis. Being Hungarian as an intrinsic value has risen well above business excellence and competition.

But are there any social/economic benefits of this phenomenon to the average consumer?

No. These family patterns are more typical of economic systems in Central Asian or African countries. The problem with competitiveness is that if you get everything you need from the state to run the economy, you will not acquire the knowledge and coping strategies that are common in international business life, and so the new Hungarian capitalist class will not have all these things. This will lead to serious competitiveness problems, as uncompetitive businesses will be created on the international market.

How can this process be changed?

- it is not easy to find legal solutions, since, these oligarchs obtained billions of HUF through *de jure* regular public tenders (selected by independent juries), as published in the Hungarian Gazette (Official Journal of the Hungarian Government);
- it is not easy to investigate infringements (e.g. blatantly overpriced public procurement, state subsidies and preferential loans that give a competitive advantage).

There are two possible ways:

- “loser state”: the solution chosen by the new regime is to accept that these assets are already gone, to try to restore the independence of the institutions, and to try to recover those assets where there is a clear violation. But it no longer adopts the methodology of tailor-made legislation to recover the assets by applying heavy pressure.
- the other method is more in harmony with many people's sense of justice: a new regime comes and is outraged at the extent of the theft and tries to take back the assets. Counter-measures are initiated: those who have benefited from favourable regulation are targeted with counter-regulation and those who have played a role in undermining the independence of independent institutions are replaced.



The next question is whether the current system is stable or eroding. To what extent is the system stable and what role does corruption play in it? Both are true: the system is eroding, but it is also stable.

Legitimacy

All systems, even autocracies need legitimacy. What we see in Hungary today is an erosion of legitimacy: the system is in a kind of downward spiral. Corruption which is part of the system is becoming more and more important. Corruption is not only systemic; it is often legalised. Ideology is no longer relevant; the political campaign often focuses on visceral fears and the socio-demographic composition of the voters of the governing party which is downgrading, too. The system has eroded steadily since 2010, but it also shows stability and it is hard to imagine that it collapses.

There are three pillars that sustain the system:

- 1.) Institutional transformation ("state capture"), alternative institutional solutions: Potemkin-institutions, tailor-made legislation, unprecedented centralisation in the European Union, shadow state and the emergence of a parallel civil society, dichotomy with the European Union and the multinational companies ("hedging").
- 2.) Living standards that are partly independent of economic indicators - the economic performance of the system is ambivalent: long-term indicators (e.g. productivity, competitiveness) are disastrous, but short-term ones seem to be steady, and the cost-of-living crisis does not seem to be so severe that the masses would rise up against the system)
 - 35% increase in real wages between 2013 and 2020,
 - from COVID, but especially from 2022 onwards, the cost-of-living crisis and the fall in real wages emerge at the same time.
- 3.) The state and business working together
 - staggeringly high investment rates (not only the overall investment rate but also the rate of private investment)
 - multinational companies are being driven out of some sectors or the conditions of competition are being manipulated (e.g. media, banking, retail, energy)
 - those that remain are making their own trade-offs (85% of German companies claimed they would reinvest in Hungary in 2022)
 - investment rates are relatively high, from 2016 to 2022, among the highest in the EU
 - foreign capital inflows have not stopped, although the role of Asian companies is increasing (in particular South Korean players have emerged in large numbers).



The hybrid regime will remain stable if two of the three pillars above are sustained.

What can the EU do?

- the rule of law procedure is a good tool, but it is late,
- conditionality mechanism: getting out of state capture should not be an expectation, but corruption specifically related to EU funds, for example, may be somewhat reduced,
- the European Commission should be more transparent in its negotiations and the implementation of measures should be monitored,
- allocation of funds to NGOs, local authorities,
- “big business” and multinational companies should be sensitised to the rule of law.

From a certain viewpoint, the process is a stalemate: the EU is more determined than ever as we witness a turnaround on the EU side following the activation of the rule of law mechanism, while there is no change of approach on the Hungarian side. Results can be achieved on sub-issues, but the system will not dismantle itself. If the 27 conditions are met, it can contribute to a progressive reduction in the corruption of EU funds - the more meritorious these steps are, the more likely they are to contribute to the erosion of the system. The most important aspect is the restoration of the independence of the judiciary.

III. Politics, political science / What should the opposition do and how?

There are two paradigms about the current system:

- the system is so professionally devised that it does not need to use harsh dictatorial means to stay in power, it is irreplaceable,
- the other paradigm is that the regime can be replaced but only with great difficulty, and the Hungarian opposition has done something wrong so far. There are many historical examples to support this view, such as the recent fall of the Montenegrin government, which similarly appeared to be completely unremovable.

Not only is there historical precedent for this, but the literature also states that these hybrid, competitive autocracies can most typically be defeated and replaced through elections. That is why we need to talk about the topic of elections. We have to perfectly understand the fault lines in the Hungarian electorate and know the socio-demographic characteristics of Fidesz's core base. If we look at the core base of the various European populist parties and that of the Fidesz, a strong similarity can be found.



Where does Fidesz enjoy a majority?

- among the low-educated,
- in smaller towns and villages,
- among elderly people.

What does all this mean?

The opposition can conclude that Fidesz voters should not be addressed, because they would not believe the opposition parties and politicians anyway, so the opposition tries to reach an audience that may not like the opposition parties, but will certainly vote for them. In practice, this is what the opposition is doing, so it gives up on the group that is in a numerical majority.

What are the three basic questions that need to be answered when developing an opposition communication strategy?

1) Topics?

It has to be acknowledged that issues which are not present at the level of everyday life, such as the rule of law or the issue of sexual minorities, have to be let go. We need to talk about the everyday issues that are the natural interface between the opposition and the electorate (e.g. education system, health care).

2) How?

Strategically, given the scarcity of communication space, it is important to communicate very consistently about the issues that are being talked about, to communicate a lot about a few things, to be proactive and not to follow Fidesz's thematic directions.

3) In what kind of linguistic style?

Short sentences, simplicity.

For a long time, it was a general idea that the Hungarian opposition was so weak that Fidesz had to generate an external enemy image, whether it be the IMF, the EU, refugees or even George Soros, so that the enemy image would become a mobilising force. This was indeed the case until the end of 2019, the beginning of 2020, when two things happened:

- the opposition could mobilise to some extent in the municipal elections, and already during that campaign and the period afterwards, substantive debates developed between the opposition and Fidesz,
- the COVID pandemic: there was a situation to which Fidesz had to react somehow, i.e. it did not have to create an enemy.



On the one hand, there was an external enemy, and on the other hand, there was an opposition force to which Fidesz had to react. Since then, however, all the major conflicts that have arisen around the government (for example, the situation of education and EU funds, the war, the issue of sanctions, the conflict with the Hungarian Medical Chamber) are not conflicts between the opposition and the government, but the government is confronted with various civil society organisations, the European Union and foreign partners, while the opposition exists in a parallel, alternative reality.

What do we see on the opposition side?

- some opposition politicians change parties,
- a shadow government has been formed by one of the opposition parties which the existing government does not have to react to, but the other opposition parties do because they have a problem with its existence,
- person-centred changes are taking place, and opposition parties have to react to these changes while the government does not need to react to those.

And as long as the opposition and the government exist in such a separate reality, no substantive change can be expected. Furthermore, Fidesz has no interest in bringing these realities closer, they have no need for the opposition. The opposition should find a way to provoke the government's attention.

What could be done?

About 15% of the total population claims to be liberal. Messages could be found to appeal to these voters, but the main problem is that there is no real content. After Fidesz's two-thirds majority win in 2022, the question rightly arises: can the government be defeated within the system at all? The government has eliminated the conditions of fair competition from politics, which means that within this framework the regime is almost invincible. Even the cost-of-living crisis has failed to sway the government's popularity. Opposition leaders are also unsure whether they are now defining themselves in relation to the government or the system. There should have to be a paradigm shift in the opposition but there is little chance of that until 2026.

What kind of opposition do we want?

- there is a need for a credible opposition capable of building alternatives (credibility problem in the opposition: some of them failed before 2010, others failed after),
- the "Gyurcsány factor" - there is a leadership crisis in the opposition (there are six to eight opposition parties, but they do not represent a united force, and even rival each other, the formation of the shadow government is a sign of the opposition's crisis),



- intellectual deficit in the design and implementation of the campaign strategy - the same actors ran different campaigns between 2010 and 2022,
- lack of social knowledge and ability to understand society.

A paradigm shift in opposition

- the opposition should step outside the traditional framework and move the centre of gravity of politics out of the Parliament,
- it plays in a space where it cannot win: in practice, it is not doing what it promised, including lacking an intensive presence in the countryside and making no effort to reach beyond its own voter base.

What are the elements of policy innovation?

From a political theory perspective, political innovation is nothing more than the combination of available policy instruments by a political entrepreneur (politician or political party) in order to gain a competitive advantage in the political market.

- 1.) Situation assessment: Fidesz voters now outnumber opposition voters in both quantity and quality - they are more numerous and more valuable because they are specifically tied to the party.
- 2.) Situation: since 2010, Fidesz has brought the most political innovation to Hungarian politics, one of the most important elements of which is the professionalisation of "opposition management".
- 3.) Dealing with failures: the failure of the opposition is that in this system it is not enough to be good, but has to be innovative in a situation of total inequality. The political market never provides equality (distorting conditions make it difficult for opposition parties and opposition politicians to prevail), the opposition has to be better and more innovative.
- 4.) Interpretations: a return to liberal democracy will not happen by the consolidation of the system, but only by the replacement of the government, and for that some kind of innovation is needed. There is still a certain level of freedom in Hungary, but for the time being Fidesz is making better use of the tools of politics.
- 5.) Opportunities: Fidesz has to be defeated by its own innovation. "Opposition management" means the constant linking of the opposition's positions to those of the minority. The opposition is likely to do well if it can present its ideas to the majority (e.g. the EU membership issue - it should demonstrate that those who vote for Fidesz want Huxit).



IV. Media and media policy

What types of perspectives and affiliations do voters in the countryside have? What kind of worldview and media consumption is behind them? And what are the reasons for rejecting the opposition? What elements should an effective counter-strategy include?

Who can be persuaded?

- Fidesz-fanatics have a very strong emotional attachment, an unbreakable tie to the party that has become part of their identity, which means that there is little to do with them,
- beyond that, there are those who support Fidesz on certain issues, but they are convinced that Fidesz has handled the pandemic or the migration crisis well, and who could be persuaded if necessary by the opposition,
- then there are the marginal voters, typically living in the countryside, less educated and less engaged in public life, many of them young. They can only be addressed with loud messages because they are otherwise not engaged in public life and politics.

Worldviews of Fidesz voters

- “The communists ruined our family and that's why I won't vote for the left because I would offend their memory, I have to vote for Fidesz”,
- heavily keen on order,
- image of a strong leader,
- a commitment to traditional values,
- Christian conservative values, not necessarily religious,
- national interests have been hijacked by Fidesz: Fidesz has a strong commitment to values, a long-term vision and strategy and that is why they vote for the governing party, compared to the opposition's sheer vision of "replacing Viktor Orbán",
- it is also important to build community: with daily propaganda (be it sports success or the fact that Hungarian hospitality is world famous).

Media consumption habits of Fidesz voters

- they read mostly free content, with the dominant role of state media
- television has been an influential element in their socialisation, and as a result, they accept what they hear and see almost uncritically,
- with simple and clear messages, Fidesz provides a coherent worldview to which people can relate,
- they do not know any other politicians (Fidesz regularly appears in communities).



What could be the opposition's topic?

- a national cause and sentiment,
- education: these people could be addressed through their children, in some places schools are achieving great results. This would also be a way to reach families.

The state of press and media freedom in Hungary

In 2022, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Hungary 85th in its press freedom index of 180 countries, with Hungary ranking 25th in 2009 and 23rd in 2010. Since 2019, the annual report of Freedom House, which evaluates political rights and civil liberties, has ranked Hungary as only "partly free" and, also since 2022; the internet has been ranked "partly free" in the country.

Hungary, where the public is highly polarised, has one of the lowest trust scores for news. In the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021, Hungary together with Slovakia was listed at the bottom of the list with a score of 30, while Romania scored 42 and Poland (which is considered another bastion of illiberalism) 48. According to the Reuters Institute, the low level of trust in the public media is particularly problematic. In 2022, Hungary was again among the worst performers, with only 27% of respondents saying they mostly trust the news, just 1 point ahead of Slovakia or the United States, which scored the same. Only 15% of Hungarian respondents think that the media are not under undue political or business influence.

Free political debate and the free exchange of different opinions, which are prerequisites for the functioning of democratic societies, are severely restricted in Hungary, especially outside the capital. The situation is exacerbated by ongoing smear campaigns against human rights activists and independent voices, aimed at stifling civil society and sending a clear and frightening message that any form of criticism of the government will be met with immediate retaliation. By repeatedly disregarding the rulings of national and international courts, the government has shown that it has no intention of ameliorating the situation of the rule of law, which is essential for the functioning of democracy and even for the unhindered exercise of freedom of expression.

The problems are complex and multifaceted, affecting the media market, media regulation, public service media, the state of local publicity and the situation of journalists and newsrooms. Hungarian independent journalism is in financial difficulties. One possible way to promote quality content production is to provide financial support to editorial offices and journalists. This is particularly appropriate in areas such as investigative journalism, solution-oriented journalism and coverage of socially disadvantaged/marginalised individuals and groups. International donors do not necessarily have the local knowledge that would lead to the best use of resources, and it would be beneficial to entrust this task to a meta-organisation. This would



help not only to support the livelihood of editors and journalists but also to support the production of quality content on timely topics, focusing on socially and politically relevant issues.

Opposition parties need to increase their online presence, both on traditional online surfaces and on social media platforms, not only because they are cut off from a significant part of traditional media platforms, but also because this is where they can effectively reach their voters and potential voters. The main share of non-informed voters remains among the youngest, and in view of this, media literacy efforts and outreach to them need to be intensified and made more effective than ever. It is an important task for independent media, NGOs and the opposition to make it clear to pro-government voters, as clearly as possible, that editorial freedom is not being exercised in the pro-government media in the way that even pro-government voters would expect. Independent media should bring reliable information to an increasing number of voters through stable and predictable operations.

Furthermore, with regard to journalists and media workers

- 1) A very thorough needs assessment should be carried out among the target group to know who they are,
- 2) Infrastructural challenge: there is no proper journalists' association. Any activity that keeps or maintains live contact with journalists in general, whether they are editors, freelancers or even bloggers (should be a primary focus for all projects),
- 3) It would be good if it published more professional positions on the functioning of the media (it would be good to find capacities to position itself professionally, to become a resource that would be a point of reference on issues concerning the media, the press, journalism),
- 4) The media is a hot topic even for the European Commission when it comes to opposing the illiberal actions of the Hungarian government. This is a debate in which supporters of liberal democracy should engage.



V. Political communication - charisma, enemy images, political brand

There are many factors that have led to the fourth two-third Fidesz majority in 2022, however, the fact is that despite the deteriorating situation in the Hungarian health and education systems and other sectors, or the unprecedented inflation in Europe, Viktor Orbán's popularity remains unbroken. It may point to the need to examine the communication strategies that play a role in the construction of political personalities or political icons, including the creation of an enemy image. It works with one of the most powerful human emotions: fear.

From a commercial marketing angle, Viktor Orbán is a superbly constructed political brand, a precisely measured unity of emotional and functional values: political expertise, dominance, an average Christian man who is “one of us” and a grandfather walking with his grandchildren. The human brain's information processing capacity is limited, which is why brands work so well as informational shortcuts, or symbols as simple markers of complex meanings. But in the case of Viktor Orbán, the phenomenon is not just a simple brand, but a political icon, a "heroic defender". And heroes require battles, just as groups require outsiders to form. To quote the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: "And prophets are created in crisis when the established order begins to falter." Enemy creation is one of the oldest forces of group cohesion. The simple binary oppositions of threat and rescue, of us and them, of good and evil, are easy to understand without any historical, political, social or economic background.

Fidesz's communication has been strategically shaping Hungarian public discourse since 2015, creating a constant crisis situation. First, it gave the threat of migration which, in line with current marketing trends, personified George Soros who became a symbol of universal evil threatening Hungary. Orbán himself pointed out this strategy in Tucker Carlson's film: “he [Soros] represents everything that is not good for this country.” Soros's name has become an icon that threatens the symbolic, material, political or communication capital of the party, and he is also associated with Ferenc Gyurcsány, who is a largely banal opposition icon of all domestic political problems. The main disinformation narratives of recent years have also been linked to these images of the enemy, based on threat and fear: the political attack on LGBTQ groups and the opposition's pro-war stance. Viktor Orbán's constant narratives of victory which have made him a warrior in various types of crisis situations in the political arena since 1989, make him the sole defender of Hungary, evoking the myth of the hero.

Disaster-based communication masks the real causes of anxiety so that the fear of a decline in living standards and cost-of-living problems can be overridden by the threat of designated enemies. The 2022 election campaign, in line with current marketing trends, worked mainly with negative messages and used strategically constructed enemy images. In contrast, the enemy images of opposition campaign communication were diversified and much less



coherent. They were based on keywords such as corruption, lies and treason, which are long-established, overused and outdated expressions.

Recommendation: develop strategically designed negative campaigns that are free of disinformation, with a message that is easy to understand and with a clear presentation of the real crisis situations and consistent personification.

Viktor Orbán introduced the populist agenda with his 2002 speech at Buda Castle when he declared that he wanted to play by his own rules. This method has worked since 2010. One of the first milestones of populism in Hungary was the social referendum, a completely populist instrument that rallied 3.5 million voters behind Orbán who have been with him ever since.

How can 2.5-3 million voters be created on the opposition's side?

- rule of law, lifestyle issues, corruption: voters cannot be mobilised by these issues,
- to a certain extent Fidesz's functioning should be copied,
- communicate about issues that affect people's own lives (e.g. the cost-of-living crisis) in a way that they can understand,
- opposition parties should communicate in a unified way, for example, that inflation is there due to Viktor Orbán's failed policies,
- opposition party funds should be used to set up alternative media.

Balázs Orbán himself has made it clear that those who own the media own the country, too: the current dominant media market should be changed by alternative propaganda media.

VI. Vision, narrative and the Hungarian countryside

A radical renewal of the Hungarian opposition's political communication is needed, but without a value-driven counter-alternative that inspires, mobilises and engages a significant part of the citizens intellectually and emotionally, winning would be just a matter of chance. It should be borne in mind that every election campaign is different, and that beyond the drawing board, a lot of spontaneous ideas, and above all political sense, are needed. But even that is not enough if there is no value-based foundation and no political ideology that grasps complex realities and serves as a compass on the most important issues.

It is especially important now that identity politics is booming globally that voters who adore populist and illiberal political entrepreneurs, could be convinced only by a liberal-democratic elite which is confident in its worldview, and of course, works hard. Meanwhile, the time factor does not yet favour the opposition and alternative worldviews. The parliamentary elections in April 2022 signal a strong "Orbanisation" of the country, especially in the countryside and even



more so in smaller municipalities. A striking example of this process is the way in which the earlier anti-Russian nature of Fidesz voters has gradually been replaced by a stance that is 'understanding' of Putin and even blames Ukraine. It is very likely that the general interpretation of reality represented by the Prime Minister and his party is linked to the victimisation of the aggressor and the support for the Hungarian 'pro-peace' government policy. The retuning of society towards Russia did not begin in February 2022, at the outbreak of war, but even earlier.

But why does the massive majority vote for Fidesz? As far as the "hardcore" is concerned, they get their daily success, pride and support from the party: they feel it comes from Viktor Orbán personally. In return, they persevere even if they have to choose between heating and eating in winter. Many of them still choose on the basis of old political fault line: according to their family background and upbringing, they "don't believe a word any communist says". As the election results show, their number is growing, from around 1.1 million in 2010 to between 1.3 and 1.5 million voters today: they are linked to the party on an identity basis. However, the engagement of peripheral voters is not as strong. In addition, they tend to be less educated in terms of social status, live in smaller municipalities and are often young people who are indifferent to politics. When Fidesz uses very extreme means and forms of communication, it wants to target these marginal voters.

However, there is general scepticism about the opposition. A typical opinion is that they lack a solid set of values, and simply pick up on issues they regard fashionable. Not everyone who votes for Orbán is an unreserved supporter of Fidesz, but they convince themselves that corruption is part of everyday life, either on utilitarian grounds or in accordance with a culturally dominant view of politics. Unsurprisingly, pro-government people are basically informed by the pro-government media. The "Hungarian national feeling" appropriated by the ruling party is so strong that it would be difficult to formulate any kind of effective opposition narrative against it.



VII. A Populist International

The Orbán regime is now out of the European and global mainstream, which did not start in 2015, but has been going on since 2010. 2015 is of course an important turning point, the year of the radical populist turn, but the process itself started in 2002. All of this was completed in 2021 with the withdrawal of Fidesz from the EPP.

Some basic assumptions:

- the Orbán regime cannot be consolidated,
- it is not really free to choose what it does and with whom, but is subject to very serious constraints and limitations,
- the Orbán regime is more solid than ever within Hungary,
- one of the biggest risks to the regime comes from outside.

Foreign policy objective:

- to ensure the functioning of the domestic system and to create a favourable foreign policy climate for this, so that the government does not have to fear sanctions and face inconveniences,
- a change in the hegemony, in other words, to replace the main European political elite of today; to achieve a situation at the European and international levels in order not to have to face sanctions or pressure,
- at the European level, although the populist parties of the right are gaining strength, Italy has not become a success story for Orbán, while in France Marine Le Pen is currently leading but she lost the last elections and will certainly have to wait a few more years,
- European Parliament elections: projections suggest that the radical right will not be proportionally stronger after the 2024 elections,
- Russian aggression against Ukraine has upset any plans for a merger of the far right and radical populist forces: the possibility of this is further away than ever before.

What can be done?

- Opposition parties should have a clear understanding of the international situation and should work out what their vision is and what solutions they offer.



VIII. Participants

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- ❖ Ábel **Bojár**, economist and political scientist, 21 Research Center
- ❖ Gergely **Brückner**, journalist, Telex; member of HES
- ❖ Iván **Csaba**, economist; member of HES
- ❖ Kristóf **Gáspár**, Political Analyst, Paradigm Institute
- ❖ József **Gulyás**, communication advisor; member of HES
- ❖ István **Hegedűs**, sociologist; Chairman of HES
- ❖ Bulesú **Hunyadi**, Head of Programmes, Political Capital
- ❖ Veronika **Kövesdi**, Lecturer, ELTE, Faculty of Humanities, Institute for The Theory of Art and Media Studies
- ❖ József **Martin**, Executive Director, Transparency International Hungary; member of HES
- ❖ György **Petőcz**, economist-journalist; member of HES
- ❖ Bálint **Ruff**, Executive Director, Partner, Invisible Hand
- ❖ András **Schweitzer**, Assistant Professor, ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Political and International Studies; member of HES
- ❖ Erik **Uszkiewicz**, lawyer; Vice-Chairperson of HES
- ❖ Andrea **Virág**, Director of Strategy, Republikon Institute