Does a civil-war mentality exist in Hungary?

A roundtable interview

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The rioting in Budapest in October 2006 following Ferenc Gyurscány's "lying speech" was the result of deep divisions in Hungarian society. Political antagonism in Hungary, played out via historical symbols, has prompted commentators in Hungary to talk about a "civil war mentality" in the country. Eurozine asks Hungarian journalists, authors, and publishers how it has come to this.

**Eurozine:** In Hungary today, historical discourse, above all about the loss of the Hungarian territories after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 and the anti-Soviet revolution in 1956, is heavily politicized. Is this because the Hungarian public remained relatively passive in 1989, and hence, in order for a multi-party democracy to function, must be mobilized via historical symbolism? Is there a danger that the party-political battle for superiority over interpretation of twentieth-century history could lead to the system change in 1989 being seen solely as a party-political project?

**Gábor Schein:** The traumatized past will necessarily be politicized in a country where national tendencies have for a long time – in fact, since the final decades of the nineteenth century – failed to be adequately interpreted in terms of nation as identity construct. There lacks an analysis of the mechanism of national myth transmission and its underlying psychological structures. This was also the case after 1989. Mediating between the various mutually distrustful and often hostile historical experiences has been impossible, while the new circumstances in a globalized world have been felt by the old forms of consciousness as a deep provocation.

Without the exchange of thoughts or ideas, and without a clearly articulated analysis of narrative self-image, all individual and collective identity constructs will be forced towards their worst possible historical variants. In retrospect, this compensatory mechanism of politics has been disastrous. In the public sphere, one experiences the lack of clear concepts of democracy or constitutional patriotism. “Literate” systems of culture
traditionally provide the models for the construction of collective identity. The battle for interpretive authority over the creation of collective self-images is embedded in a broad process whereby the quality of the way such systems are handled has undergone an astounding decline. In terms of ability for rational self-reflection, Hungarian politics is woefully underdeveloped. Political messages have become ever more simplistic, short-term, exclusivist, and belligerent. The large parties, above all the Hungarian Civic Union (FIDESZ), are increasingly becoming vehicles for irrational and delusional interests, surrounded by similar, highly aggressive satellite organizations.

**Jody Jensen:** Trianon and the Revolution of 1956 are historical wounds in Hungary that always elicit strong emotions among the population. They can also be employed to manipulate national feelings in ways that can redirect public scrutiny of and attention to contemporary, existing problems towards injustices of the past. When the domestic situation becomes increasingly divisive and uncertain, evoking these emotionally-charged issues can, even if only in the short term, mobilize certain elements of the population. This does not, however, mean that the population as a whole can be mobilized on these issues.

Certainly, Hungary’s transition was an elite-driven, negotiated project where civil society was given little space to voice its concerns and contribute. It was never approached as a meaningful and equal partner by the political elite of any administration. This has a consequence today for Hungary. With the required belt-tightening, people feel disenfranchised, marginalized and alienated by the political class. They are less willing to accept reform because they have had little or no input into the reform process. Also, communication between the political elite and the population has been insufficient regarding the logic, strategy, and direction of reforms.

**János Salamon:** The loss of Hungarian territories (commonly referred to as the “Trianon tragedy”) and the 1956 Revolution are emotionally highly charged issues. They can be said to be “heavily politicized” in the sense that politicians, especially the populist ones, will use them for their transparently shabby purposes. FIDESZ politicians, under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, are far more unscrupulous in their populist, demagogic rhetoric than the governing socialist politicians gathered around Gyurcsány, although they too flatter and wheedle the public in order to stay in power. The communication between the two major parties, and so the “political fight for interpretive superiority”, has settled and stabilized on a level comfortably low for the politicians and their politically apathetic and uninformed constituency. It is the level of deeply but vaguely felt emotions and murky instincts.

As to the question whether political mobilization today makes up for a lack of popular mobilization in 1989, and whether this could be damaging in terms of a broad social consensus about the communist past: although no blood was shed in 1989, it was still a revolution; well, sort of. People were mobilized by a sense of sheer euphoria as they joined together in a celebration of freedom. I don’t know if it could qualify as popular mobilization, but I know that the whole of Hungarian society participated. There was no room for political mobilization then and there because that temporary intoxication with freedom in 1989 actually prohibited any attempt to harness the universal enthusiasm and drive it toward some definite, long-term political goal. Once the great freedom bash was over, the struggle for power started, as is wont to happen in the second act of
revolutions. The struggle continues to this day and naturally everything is up for grabs: the communist past (and present), 1956, 1945, the Arrow-Cross past (and present), the Horthy era, Trianon, 1919 - just to mention the chewiest bones of contention. I don’t think there was ever a broad social consensus in this country about the communist past or any other sore points in Hungarian history, including the 1989 “revolution”, or system change (there was none in the heady days of the freedom fest, only a momentary setting aside of differences). And of course, no damage can be done to a non-existent consensus.

Eszter Babarczy: Political emotions do indeed run high in Hungary and since 1989 party loyalty has to a large extent been constructed around historical grievances. This process is quite manifest on the Right, where historical resentment serves as an underpinning for party loyalty and political identification. The typical form of this unifying passion is to push the limits of international tolerance by repudiating the Trianon peace treaty. However, apart from a small “revisionist” group that does indeed wish to redraw Hungary’s borders, the memory of the two world wars is mostly private. Fond memories of the interwar Horthy regime are kept alive not so much by nationalist sentiment, but rather the reverse: the age groups in question were young and impressionable during the interwar period and they harbour fond memories. These had to be repressed under Kádár and have now come to the surface as political sentiments. The same applies to memories of ’56: as there were no opportunities to remember and re-interpret those events in public, private memories form the basis of the now emergent cult of ’56. These private memories were passed onto children or grandchildren as romantic stories of resistance, or stories of escape, emigration, and a new life – or, just as frequently, stories of fear and horror.

These personal memories were rich soil for the new political elite after 1989, who had little experience in politics but were fluent in ideological and historical interpretation. This is part of the reason why symbolic issues came to dominate party politics. On the other hand, neither the people nor the elite knew how high the human and social costs of the transition would be; the few who did were wary of speaking about it. So symbolic history came in handy as a substitute for policy-centred politics. In the late 1980s, people were easily mobilized: we had high participation rates at elections, which I do not think was due to populist uses of history. People *did* want to cross over into the dreamland of an Austrian television commercial and *did* want to have choice – choice in the supermarket and choice in politics. 1989 was a time of real euphoria: short-lived but real.

However, because of the many disappointments and difficulties that followed, the memory of this euphoria has by now became something of an embarrassment. Young people born at the time seriously think that nothing really happened, that it was all set up and done by “them up there”. In 1996, I conducted interviews with young people age between 17 and 18; one of the thing I asked was, “Tell me what happened in 1989”. Even in 1996, they tended to give a textbook answer (though they could have had memories). Today, the 18 to 20 generation – new voters that is – have no memories of 1989 or before; accordingly, all they know is how much they resent the present situation. I’ve just started a project where this age group is asked to ask their parents and grandparents what they thought, what they hoped for, and what they felt in 1989-1990, in the hope that such inter-generational enquiry can help revive memories and start a new conversation about the system change, one without a political overtone.
Gábor Csordás: In a polarized political field, everything that can be politicized will be. Since only events of high emotional importance are suitable as tokens in a media-political game, the question is why historical events – and why these events in particular – have such emotional importance in Hungary today. I have to mention right away that 1956 could be a matter for real historical-political discourse. First, because for a very short time during the revolution, a variety of alternatives were open – or at least seemed to be – and a variety of political programmes emerged. These ranged from the ultra-conservative, not to say mediaeval, propositions of cardinal Mindszenthy, through István Bibó’s genuine social-democratic project, to the illusion that the Soviet system could be corrected along humanistic-national lines entertained by the communist reformists around Imre Nagy. Second, because the survival strategies, behavioural patterns, and mentalities that became ingrained after the communist restoration after 1956 have determined, in the long run, how Hungarians react to historical opportunities. A surprisingly virulent mix of gentleman-bureaucrat, manorial servant, and provincial petty-bourgeois developed (or rather, was reinforced). Bibó called this phenomenon the “distorted Hungarian character”. He attributed it to the repeated experience of defeated liberation movements, in the aftermath of which Hungarians time and again agreed to give up public freedom in return for modest individual prosperity. In the ten years that followed the 1956 revolution, Hungarian intellectuals steadily abandoned their resistance and became the cherished domestics of bloody-handed buffoons. The fact that there were a few exceptions makes that fact all the more bitter. The capitulation of intellectuals alone qualifies 1956 as a genuinely relevant subject of discussion.

Returning to historical opportunities: perhaps the biggest for centuries was handed to us Hungarians at the end of the 1980s. But by then, Hungarian society had become a passive mass of self-satisfied petty-bourgeois. The majority of my compatriots were completely unable to realize or to understand how their personal perspectives were related to the common cause. This would of course have been the basic condition for a well-founded democracy. People were unable to relate their interests to the political, economic, or social programmes of the newly-formed parties. This had two severe consequences, which were mutually reinforcing. The first is the dangerous predominance of party politics, whose cause I consider to reside in the emergence of a privileged and corrupt political class and its occupation of the media sphere. This brings us to the second consequence, namely: no matter how realistic their original political aspirations, the actors of the system change were compelled to formulate their priorities in symbolic terms. Since historical mythology was the only motivating factor that people had in common, the political field quickly became completely virtualized.

This is why, for example, the whole complex of 1956 is presented in a narcissist-paranoiac narrative of the heroic Hungarian nation whose past greatness has been undermined by foreign powers and aliens hiding in its midst. The crucial point of this narrative is of course 1920 and the loss of territories belonging to the Hungarian crown but inhabited predominantly by national minorities. The main danger is that this reinforces the sense that “we have been betrayed once again”, instead of lessons being drawn. It would need more space to show how this narrative led to the alliance with Hitler and how the consequences of that alliance were incorporated within it.

We are used to looking for economic interests behind political ideologies. Some allege that the appearance of this narrative in the political-ideological discourse reflects the
interests of local capital endangered by the growing influence of multinationals. I cannot see, however, any logic in the political preferences of local tycoons – except, of course, numerous cases of corruption and state-gangsterism. Our market is far from being free: economic success depends more on the immediate benefits provided by any of the bigger parties than on the possible economic benefits or drawbacks resulting from the economic programme of a given party. This interpretation has been a kind of last-ditch opportunity for a declining Viktor Orbán (leader of FIDESZ – ed.), who, having first failed as a radical democrat and then as a conservative democrat, has not hesitated to grab it. The problem is the antidemocratic construction of his party, which does not allow him to be replaced. So he is condemned to win – at all costs. And we have learned from our history that the cost is usually high.

But it has not been difficult for Orbán to impose his logic upon his opponents. Socialists and liberals are equally ready to take up this thread, since they refuse to face neither the real lessons of 1956, nor corruption, unfinished reform, the lack of personal responsibility, the chaotic tax system, and so on. What is worse is of course that amidst the virtual debates, all these problems remain unsolved. The consequence is the stagnation and decline that we have been witnessing since the late 1990s.

**Eurozine:** Following the demonstrations in September 2006, FIDESZ was criticized for failing to distance itself from far-Right elements, and in particular from anti-Semitic utterances made by leaders of far-Right groups. To what extent is racism in general, and anti-Semitism in particular, instrumentalized by mainstream political parties?

**Gábor Schein:** Racist motives, perennial anti-Semitism, hatred of Roma, and abuse of homosexuals have increased markedly in recent years. I can't judge how far sentiments are accepted by the various sectors of society, however research has shown that young people are the most susceptible, and not necessarily those with low levels of education. Both the Christian Democrats (KDNP) and FIDESZ provoke such motives with ambiguous and often quite unequivocal statements. Such statements are a simple way to mobilize sections of the electorate whose identity structure includes – in whatever form – anti-Semitism and hatred towards Roma. It is important to be able to understand these structures in all their complexity. The populist discourse and rhetoric of the conservative parties is very consciously designed. With it, these parties attempt to reach increasingly broad sections of the electorate on highly sensitive points and constantly stoke political excitement in order to be able to employ it in the power interests of the party. The worst thing is that the Socialists and Liberals also benefit from such tactics, since anti-fascism is the only genuinely solid basis of consensus between the two parties [1]. As far as anti-Semitism and racism is concerned, it goes hand in hand with anti-democratic, not to say dictatorial tendencies. The personal tactic of Viktor Orbán, leader of FIDESZ, seems to be directed towards the moment when he can step in to save society from chaos. In this he enjoys the backing of the European populist parties.

**Jody Jensen:** As in all countries in Europe today, certain minorities within the population and electorate who feel insecure about their future will employ scapegoating as a strategy to cope with uncertainty. I, personally, have not found the Hungarians any more anti-Semitic than other western or eastern central European societies and have felt that accusations in the Western press particularly have exaggerated these claims. It must be remembered that anti-Semitism includes anti-Arab sentiments and this particularly
A virulent strain is much more prominent in the West than in the East today. These accusations have been politically instrumentalized by the governing coalition, again taken up by the Western press, to increase fear of political opposition. The politics of fear, predominant also in other parts of Europe and the world, can have even more impact and resonance in new, inexperienced, and weak democracies.

**János Salamon:** The accusation was well founded. Orbán is very pragmatic about measuring and adjusting the distance between his party and the far-Right. One day he visits the editors of the openly neo-Nazi (or neo-Arrow Cross) magazine Magyar Demokrata to congratulate them on their good work, the next day he dons a yarmulke and goes to the Jewish community to share their pain in remembering the victims of the Hungarian Holocaust.

Racism in Hungary is limited mostly to nurturing and expressing anti-Gypsy and anti-Semitic sentiments. Orbán-type politicians know better not to tinker with anti-Gypsy sentiments: because of its sheer size, the Gypsy vote is simply too precious to risk losing with ambiguous gestures or statements. The latter strategy is much safer to follow when it comes to Jews, whose presence in this country has vastly reduced since 1944. They are now greatly outnumbered by anti-Semites, so for a populist demagogue it pays to keep fanning the flame.

**Eszter Babarczy:** On the political Right, party leaders from Jozsef Antall to Viktor Orbán thought that it would be easier to accommodate the far-Right by incorporating them. In some sense it was a valid strategy (there is no party from the far-Right in parliament now), but it came at a terrible price. The clear difference between acceptable and non-acceptable forms of rightwing politics, or acceptable and unacceptable political language, was blurred. Recently, Orbán went as far as to claim that the old taboos on language are no longer valid and that he is not willing to accept any criticism or limits on such language. This is not to say that the mainstream rightwing is anti-Semitic – though certainly they do little to discourage fringe elements, and one might even say that they tacitly encourage them. Very recently, a far-Right formation (mostly made up of young and well-educated people) established a “National Guard”, donned black uniforms, and started patrolling the streets of Budapest “training for war”. Well, that’s scary. Yet I think rightwing extremism is mostly a media phenomenon in the sense that they know exactly how to enrage the liberal media and how to attract attention. It is not yet a major political force.

I also think that left-liberal commentators and intellectuals have cried wolf far too often, accusing just about anyone on the Right of anti-Semitism and totalitarian leanings. That has created resentment in people who would otherwise not be anti-Semitic in the least. Being accused of it so many times, though, they – and the people who vote for them – became desensitized.

**Gábor Csordás:** As a matter of fact, FIDESZ did not distance itself from the far-Right. Slogans such as “Hungary must not remain in opposition” or “Let Hungary belong to Hungarians”, or the claim of the KDNP (allies of FIDESZ) that the Christian majority is oppressed, hardly make sense without the subtext that Hungary is presently usurped by strangers, that is to say, Jews. I am not convinced even that FIDESZ did not manipulate the far-Right for its own purposes. It is shocking and scandalous. However, I do not think
we are living in the Weimar Republic: the idea that the over-confidence of democrats could lead to a new political disaster is hardly more than a narrative of Orbán’s political opponents. I fear that they also use the far-Right for manipulative purposes and thus contribute to the fear of my compatriots. Politics in every media society tends toward the spectacular, but nowhere to such a degree as in Hungary today.

Coming back to anti-Semitism, I could offer a lengthy treatise on the historical causes for its persistence. The great part of the analysis was done by István Bibó just after WWII, [2] and it is not difficult to apply his conclusions on our recent history. [3] Anti-Semitic “thinking” and mentality is almost omnipresent in Hungary today, and we have to understand its roots and causes. Even more important, however, is to understand that what we are currently seeing is the virtualization of anti-Semitism. It is very difficult to eradicate something virtual. The mass media has pasted together a complex of opinions concerning history, the role of religion and the Christian Church, the family, morals, the role of women, and so on. Depending on your party sympathies, you can label anybody either an anti-Semite or a Jew (or a “servant” of Jews, if no “proof” of genetic descent is available) on the basis of his opinions on issues that have to do neither with Jews nor anti-Semites. Alleged anti-Semites are referred to as “exclusionists”, whereas alleged Jews are referred to even more indirectly, simply by emphasizing that the speaker himself is a “Christian” or, even more amusingly, a “bourgeois”. Most of this was already pointed out by Bibó; what’s new is that the mass media have given it an almost palpable, audio-visual, everyday existence.

There is another, equally omnipresent racism in Hungary, namely towards Roma. There is much less discussion about anti-Roma attitudes, and even less has been done to improve their social circumstances. Every four years, before general elections, one hears of a new government project that aims at “closing the social and cultural gaps” separating Roma from the rest of Hungarian population – of course, since they make up around 7% of the electorate. Then ridiculously small sums are put aside for this purpose, so that one knows in advance that nothing will be done. The Roma do not have their own intellectuals and have very, very few sympathizers in Hungarian society. Popular racism goes hand in hand with the cynicism of intellectuals and the “tolerance” of politicians towards segregation and discrimination (the only kind of “tolerance” well-established in Hungary). [4]

Eurozine: How do you interpret calls coming from the Right for “a restoration of the moral order”, a reform movement whose basis, it is implied, is extra-parliamentary? Do you consider populist, extra-parliamentary political mobilization to be a threat?

Gábor Schein: Such announcements, often made by disconcerted, obsolescent protagonists of recent history, make clear how difficult it is to adopt the functionalities of medial mass democracy in a country with a paternalist tradition, and how deep certain intellectuals’ tendency towards authoritarianism is. For that reason, populism represents a far greater threat in the new EU member states in central and eastern Europe than in the old member states. It also damages their potential for economic development. In these countries, mental reality and factual reality are often worlds apart, as the Hungarian example demonstrates. Severe disturbances in the functions of the State, in the legal and educational sectors, in financial discipline and in constitutional practice, abuse of power by the police, and deficits in democratic awareness, all create an explosive mixture. The fact that the explosion has not yet occurred is due solely to the
country’s geopolitical position.

**Jody Jensen:** The threat of extra-parliamentary political mobilization is unrealistic and overestimates the power of the Right to mobilize. There is little difference, in terms of political platforms, between Left and Right in Hungary today; people know this. Calls for the restoration of a moral order are being heard from many corners of Hungarian public and civic life, and I believe rightly so. What we have witnessed is an extreme deterioration of political behaviour on all sides of the political equation, and this is what is being spoken about on the streets and in civic circles today in Hungary. The public “good” has been replaced by the public “bad” and calls for a redefinition of codes of conduct and ethics is long overdue; this criticism is levelled at both the governing coalition and the opposition. I do not believe taking politics to the streets is a bad sign when institutions are dysfunctional and public trust in them is low. I grew up in a culture where public demonstrations were a part of everyday life and taken as a civic duty on the part of the electorate to both express support for and criticism of political policies.

What I consider a greater threat is the disillusionment and distrust of democratic institutions and processes as a result of what I call the “lumpenization” of the political elite. Both the governing coalition and opposition combined cannot attract more than 50% of the population. The real question is: Where are the alternatives that most Hungarians are seeking? Who will represent the interests of the majority of Hungarians who feel left out of the democratic process?

This is not a particularly Hungarian “disease”. Most democratic countries in the world are in the process of redefining democracy in the new context of globalization. Most countries have low voter turnout and traditional participation patterns have decreased as a result of the lack of confidence in traditional politics (including parties) and institutions. Increasingly, there is a gap between politics and citizens which, in the case of a new democracy like Hungary, has grave consequences in terms of public trust. This crisis of democracy, however, can be felt throughout Europe today. Its manifestations in Hungary may reflect the particular weaknesses and character of this context, but the crisis is global.

**János Salamon:** In September 2006, in a closed-door meeting with his party’s top echelon, Gyurcsány spoke the truth – a rare moment in the public life of any politician in a democracy – by saying that he and his fellow satraps had been lying to the electorate for quite some time. The Right, when in power, did the same, minus the admission, but now, masquerading as the Lord Protector of the Innocent and the Pure, calls for the establishment of a “new moral order”. Should we be amused, or feel threatened? The short answer is that fair-minded Hungarians can afford to be amused by all this buffoonery as long as the political atmosphere in the whole of the European Union, and especially north-west of here, remains sane enough not to encourage our domestic fools to the point where they might want to take their own jokes even more seriously than they already do.

One needs to ask why the demand for extra-parliamentary politics exists. Much to the chagrin of well-meaning neo-Kantian liberal theorists, most people living in democracies are quite incapable of accepting a purely formal rational justification of the law to which they are subject; in other words, they are incapable of conceiving freedom as obeying
laws they, as rational beings, give to themselves. This, in itself, wouldn't be a problem if there were some generally acceptable, non-formal, substantive, normative sorts of rational justification available. Alas, in our modern age, none can be had. However, because they must have some form of justification, this leaves people with only one choice: they will look for, even crave, irrational ones. Instead of the legal/bureaucratic authority residing in parliament, they will turn to a charismatic authority that sets up shop outside parliament, on the street. If I don’t think taking politics out onto the streets will undermine parliamentary democracy here, that’s only because I don’t think Hungary is in the position to set up a tyranny in the middle of the European Union. But an example to follow is eagerly awaited by many.

**Eszter Babarczy:** Extra-parliamentary political mobilization is not a threat *per se* - I am all for people’s right to demonstrate against anything they are not satisfied with. What is disturbing however is that much of it is organized by the second largest parliamentary party, FIDESZ. This creates the impression that FIDESZ is ready to proceed to a “new state of civilization” (as they call it), where parliamentarism is seen not be the sole legitimate form of doing mainstream politics, and even as being replaceable by something else. What this something else would be, though, is not well defined by FIDESZ. They create organizations and abandon them after they served their purpose. The meaning of legitimacy and the rules of the democratic game are becoming uncertain. That is dangerous, since the formless dissatisfaction that many people feel towards mainstream politics is easily manipulated.

**Gábor Csordás:** Restoration of the moral order means of course that others should behave decently. To put it somewhat cynically, this is the slogan for those outside power’s charmed circle. I do not exclude the possibility that those who proclaim it mean well, but those it reverberates among can hardly be called moral heroes. The repeated success of such slogans in itself guarantees their instrumental, populist character. In view of the corruption of the political class, I would welcome any genuine extra-parliamentary movement that exerted pressure on the government and that would force them, by the law of competition, to behave more decently. However, I don’t see any such movements. All we have is Viktor Orbán’s weak effort to cultivate his electoral base. As a “movement”, the opposition has absolutely no programme except “Gyurcsány must go”, which serves the interests of its parliamentary opponents.

**Eurozine:** The law giving privileges to Hungarian minorities, passed in 2001 during Viktor Orbán’s tenure as prime minister, was seen by Romania and Slovakia as contravening their national sovereignty. The MSZP, meanwhile, has been criticized for a head-in-the-sand attitude to the minorities question and for seeing European integration as a panacea. How do you evaluate the debate and what direction do you think it is heading in?

**Gábor Schein:** This issue is connected with one of the deepest traumas of twentieth-century Hungarian history. The mark left on nations by negative traumas can be extremely long lasting. The motivational force of a trauma within the psychological mechanism of a large group is often retained in wholly different historical situations. Traumas behave metaphorically. They transpose themselves through time, and offer – without themselves being reflected on – models for new experience that are not, or need not, be negative at all. Very little is known in Hungary about how this transposition
works, in other words, about the psychological structure and reactions of a “literate” national consciousness. The Socialists have not only carried over from the twentieth century the lack of unreflected experience and clear understanding of the pathology of the Hungarian national consciousness, but also the guilty conscience about the neglect of the Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries. For that reason, they often respond in completely the wrong way, and operate a policy of fear, even if positive policies also originate from them. Here, one has to reckon not only with the reaction of the traumatized national identity of the Hungarians, but also that of the Slovakians, Romanians, Serbians, Croatians, and Ukrainians. The conflict zone did not become any less hot after the EU accession of Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary, although the borders between the countries took on an additional meaning. It doesn’t look as if a reasonable agreement will be possible any time soon.

**Jody Jensen:** The referendum on citizenship for these minorities did not pass and never will. Hungary’s record concerning the treatment of minorities within the nation state is a fine example of what can be done in such situations. We have governments for the Roma minority, for example, that work in parallel with other local and national bodies. Hungarians have widely come to accept that the best strategy for protecting ethnic Hungarians outside increasingly redundant state borders is by protecting minorities within Hungary.

**János Salamon:** This is just another emotionally charged issue, closely related to the “Trianon tragedy”. The MSZP deserves criticism for its handling of the referendum of 5 December 2004, that is, for its defiant posturing during the pre-referendum campaign. The party urged its voters to say no to the question whether over-the-border Hungarians should be granted “nationality status”, thereby antagonizing ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania and Slovakia and so providing the nationalist Right with ammunition, just the thing Orbán & Co. badly needed after another lost election. It is very likely that the voters would have rejected the proposal without any urging on the part of MSZP. It is, however, irrational to criticize the Socialist Party for putting its faith in European integration. For in what else should it put its faith? In Hungary becoming a major European power on its own by recapturing its lost territories? In becoming a neo-Christian or neo-Pagan bulwark rising proudly against the billowy waves of globalization and market capitalism? I think it’s important to understand that the debate about this (or indeed about any other issue) between the ruling party and the opposition is not heading anywhere, it doesn’t have any direction.

**Eszter Babarczy:** The unfortunate consequence of using the issue of Hungarian minorities in party politics is that minorities are not well served by either the Right or the Left. There is a lot of high-blown rhetoric and not much attention to the actual needs of these people. I don’t expect this situation to change in the near future. Parties are entrenched in the respective symbolic positions.

**Gábor Csordás:** The 2001 law helped as much as jumping around in folk costumes helps. The disadvantaged position of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries has only become a political problem because Orbán has his correspondents there. The worst that can happen to a minority is to be supported by anti-democrats in the motherland. The second worst thing is to become a reserve army of the motherland’s political parties. I
can imagine that some Socialist politicians regretted that Orbán was the first to come up with the idea, since it meant they had no choice than take the opposite end of the rope.

**Eurozine:** László Földényi has written about “the absence of the development of a bourgeoisie (Bürgertum)” in Hungary. “One of the most noticeable symptoms of this backwardness is the absence of a readiness for dialogue, for discussion, a comparison of points of view.” [5] Does a “civil war mentality” really exist among the intellectual class, or put another way, does Hungary really lack a functioning public sphere?

**Gábor Schein:** I have great difficulty answering this question. Not because I disagree with László Földényi’s judgement. However, I fear that an intellectual class no longer exists in Hungary, and there are unfortunately very few people in a position to present their arguments – at least those that one could unequivocally call intellectual – to the public. In today’s press one reads nothing but half-formed thoughts. In this sense, a civil-war mentality does indeed prevail in the public sphere; in other words, one can see the fronts, the trenches, and one can hear the noise of battle, sometimes louder, sometimes quieter. But it’s a war fought without intellectual ammunition. The opinions, the moves, of the opposing sides are impotent and blindly preordained, only the technique of war becomes increasingly lethal.

**Jody Jensen:** Many people, including and especially Ivan Vitanyi, a respected MSZP parliamentarian and scholar, have written extensively about the lack of development of a middle class in Hungary and the costs of that aborted development today. It means that the development of *Res publica*, or the public good, has weak and insufficient roots in the culture and in society. As in most places, it is exactly the middle class that embodies and carries forward the values we associate with the development of a functioning public sphere. In terms of political discourse, little can be seen that meets the need for a constructive debate on strengthening the public sphere. The political elite have not yet understood that democracy entails conflict, contained within an agreed-upon space, the outcome of which is consensus where no one actor wins everything, but where everyone wins something. It is still an either/or situation in political terms today in Hungary, at least at the political level.

On the civil level, however, there are increasing signs of public engagement and civil courage in the face of political ineptitude and destructive irresponsibility. The cynicism of the political elite regarding the Hungarian population has had unexpected consequences. Many citizens have seriously taken up the fundamental task of fighting for their civil and human rights in the face of police brutality, for example. The citizenry is beginning to awaken to the rights and obligations that democracy entails. Since the system change (which enabled many actors of the former communist elite to remain in political offices) did not go deep enough, the democratic socialization of society was slow to take shape.

With regard to the “civil war mentality”, let us not exaggerate. The core of the problem is that both sides of the political spectrum understand their survival in terms of exacerbating and exploiting the cleavages that exist because neither offers real solutions to existing problems. Hiding behind their incompetence and their increasing marginalization in both European and global terms, the lumpen political class continues the degrading and destructive discourse of self-defence. There is a kind of siege-mentality that the political elite exhibit and express publicly today. This, unfortunately,
does not make Hungary a unique case in the region. The real division is between the (at least) half of the society who does not support either side on the one hand, and the political elite on the other.

There are voices condemning the populist demagogy employed by both sides, but they are still weak and unclear. Restraints posed by the European Union before accession have been removed with enlargement and this is part of the crisis the region is experiencing today as a whole. It may be possible that only now, after nearly 20 years, a new generation, one not born under dictatorship and aware of their democratic rights and responsibilities, will begin to demand a more responsive and consensual, less polarizing democratic political and social development. But for that to happen, real leadership is required, the kind of which is unfortunately all too absent in the political sphere today in Hungary, as it is in other parts of the world.

**János Salamon:** Save for babies in arm, it is clear to all Hungarians that the nation is divided into two hostile, irreconcilable camps, much like it is in the United States. Given its integrationist agenda, it is not surprising that the MSZP side is the more civilized (more European) of the two combatants. However, that doesn’t alter the fact that instead of anything that could pass for dialogue, the two sides stare at each other loathingly from behind the barbed wire lines of their respective ideologies.

It is less widely recognized, however, that besides the obvious lack of rational political discourse, Hungary also lacks a consciously cultivated intellectual life. By this I mean that the intellectual elite – made up largely by Western oriented, educated, liberals of Budapest and the larger cities – fastidiously refrains from engaging in intellectual debate or exchange of ideas. In this civil war atmosphere, the surprising thing is not that the liberal and the nationalist elite are not on speaking terms with each other, but that members of the liberal elite – who pride themselves on being more travelled, more worldly, more urbane, more sophisticated, and, above all, more rational than their nationalist counterparts – wouldn’t recognize an urbane, sophisticated, and rational exchange of ideas if it hit them over the head.

Why is that? Well, it didn’t help that the Hungarian intellectual elite was hung, drawn, and quartered a few times in recent history. First by the “right-thinking” nationalist, Nazi-sympathizing political establishment of the 1930s; second, in the early 1940s by the Hungarian and German Nazis themselves; third, between 1945 and 1956, by the left-thinking, anti-bourgeois (read anti-culture), Stalin-sympathizing communists; fourth, between 1956 and 1989, by the soft dictatorship of the Kádár regime, under which nothing worse happened to what remained of the intellectual elite than becoming morally compromised and cut off from the ideas and thoughts, arts and sciences of the West, that is, of the world.

As a result, an average leading Hungarian intellectual today (liberal or nationalist) is much like a déclassé nineteenth-century Russian country squire who spoke no foreign tongue (French, in his case), had never heard of foreign chaps (Voltaire, say, or Goethe or Darwin), and whose idea of intellectual life was discussing crop yield with his steward or keeping up with gossip during his card evenings with the local nobility, who were every bit as cultured and enlightened as himself. And, so it goes on.
Eszter Babarczy: Intellectuals as a class lost their social status and social role during the transition period. Many of tried to retain their status by becoming close allies of parties (thereby contributing to the growth and stability of a patronage system that is rampant in Hungarian society anyway). The media reflects these developments by mirroring the political cleavage and creating and echo chamber for political sentiments. I think, however, that after the turbulence of 2006 and 2007, there is more willingness on both sides to engage in a meaningful conversation. Nevertheless, it will take years before this new public discourse is represented in the media and takes roots in social consciousness. As for the intellectual class: in a capitalist society, intellectuals need to re-define their roles as professionals (instead of ideologues). As respected professionals, they can again become opinion leaders. We are the midst of a very painful transition in this respect.

Gábor Csordás: Bürgertum was weak or absent everywhere in eastern Europe, except perhaps the Czech Republic, and is of course a kind of historical handicap. But the real question is why Hungarians are so inept at remedying or compensating for it. Enthusiastic liberals tend to think that human behaviour is directly bound up with social and legal conditions. If people don’t behave autonomously, give them individual rights; if the public sphere does not function, promote the development of the middle-class. Funnily enough, the government that dumped the biggest slice of the budget onto the middle-class was that of Viktor Orbán. The result, as we can see, has been a well-dressed mob of fanatics shouting on the squares. What our liberals tend to forget is history. History not as a chain of events with or without consequences, nor as a collection of pleasant or unpleasant examples, but as a hard and unavoidable pressure upon reality, that is, as experience. One of the oldest problems of philosophy is why we do not simply react to current conditions. The answer in my opinion – that of a sceptical liberal – is that we have a limited set of ideas, hopes, fears, and attitudes that have been selected, on a trial and error basis, over the course of a given historical experience.

If we look back at the history of eastern European nations, we can see that intellectuals were given extra importance precisely because the public sphere was weak; they were a substitute for lacking institutions. Our problem now is that there are very few independent intellectuals; most have been drawn in by the spectacle. Intellectuals lost their traditionally high status after 1989 and now seek acknowledgement where they can. And not only acknowledgement, of course, but also financial reward.

Culture in itself would be an antidote, especially its European version, with its critical, subversive character; with its ability to turn upside down all inveterate beliefs and prejudices; with its restless search for new vocabularies that make old stupidities seem senseless. Unfortunately, in Hungary, the market economy destroyed not only the social authority of intellectuals but also that of culture. Not, as is often alleged, because the market economy is in itself anti-cultural, but because most Hungarian intellectuals were unable to adapt. They either continued to cling to rapidly diminishing state funding or, as one says in Hungary, they “turned into dogs”, that is, gave up all scruples and started to sell anything, including the most base ideas. This is not to say that brilliant works have not been written since the transition. Unfortunately, both Péter Esterházy’s ironic propositions and Péter Nádas’ dramatic provocations have remained without social impact.
Interview conducted by Simon Garnett

Footnotes

1. The Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) are the larger partners in the governing coalition with the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) -- ed.

2. István Bibó, *The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944*.


4. Gábor Csordás continues: Just an example from education, the key factor in "closing the gaps". Some twenty years ago, a system of auxiliary classes was established. The idea was to give special education to pupils with disadvantaged social or family backgrounds or with learning difficulties. Teachers collected Roma children, regardless of their background or leaning abilities, into these classes; non-Roma parents avoided sending their children to these classes at all costs. After 1989, local administrations became autonomous and were able to redirect financial sources towards the "non-handicapped" classes. The result was an apartheid system too obvious to be tolerated. After pressure from human rights organizations, the idea of "coeducation" took over. Then, with the poorly camouflaged support of local administrations, parents began to found private schools to which Roma children were not admitted. (The law makes no distinction between public and private schools: the latter receive almost the same amount of financial support.) As far as I know, all legal appeals initiated by human rights organizations against these schools failed.


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