

Transition Pains

Hungary's Uncertain Dissidents

Sarah Atwood

Somewhere off a tree-lined boulevard in Budapest, Hungary, I descend into an intimate cellar café ten minutes late. Anna greets me at the gate and shakes my hand warmly. She is wearing a silver tank top, which droops fashionably over her tanned skin, set off by the diamonds around her neck. I apologize for being late, but she will hear nothing of it. "I am sitting here and just wondering to myself, 'Did I say the street so that you can understand it, or what?'" she exclaims, waving away my apologies. We sit down and she lights a long, slender cigarette.

"I am researching Hungarian democracy, you know," I begin, and ask her if she is satisfied with the state of her nation. She laughs bitterly, "This is not democracy, what we have here in Hungary." What then has been going on in the past thirteen years, if not democracy?

In the spring and summer of 2002, I addressed this and a series of related questions to the active participants, advocates, and critics of a neo-dissident movement led by former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. These interviews indicate that the answer lies not in the democracy, but in the democrats. In the confounding period of uncertainty and transition since 1990, it has become difficult for the citizens of the new democracy to separate fact from fiction, history from memory. Opportunist politicians have used this collective

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insecurity to further their own agendas, weakening the new democracy with nationalist rhetoric and populist promises. These “transition pains” associated with regime change become most apparent in the dynamics of Orbán’s controversial “Go Hungary” movement.

The Communist Legacy. Hungary, like the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, has no shortage of painful associations with the last fifty years. After World War II, the totalitarian regime installed by the Soviets gave way to a short-lived period of liberalization and reform in 1953 under Imre Nagy. This “reform era” culminated in a popular revolution in October 1956, which was suppressed by Soviet military forces after days of bloody fighting. With the backing of Moscow, János Kádár formed a new government reminiscent of the Soviet-era terror regime. In 1962, Kádár famously reversed his hard-line doctrine with the admonition that, “[He] who is not against us is with us.” The late 1980s witnessed an unprecedented growth in the number of informal associations, clubs, and debating circles that formed nascent civil organizations and political parties, including the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz). Hungary was well-positioned to negotiate a regime change in 1989, having made progressive steps toward political and economic liberalization. Nonetheless, the aftermath of the transition left Hungary saddled with deep foreign debt and extensive demands for structural reform.

The first national elections after the democratic transition granted an overwhelming victory to the center-right MDF while local elections several months later favored the western-ori-

ented SzDSz, which came to dominate the political left in the years following the regime change. Orbán’s Alliance of Young Democrats (FiDeSz) sprung from student dissident groups and was considered a junior organization of the SzDSz. The Hungarian Party for Justice and Life (MIÉP) cornered the extreme right with an anti-Semitic, nationalist platform, and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) evolved from the reform wing of the Communist party.

The Socialists won a landslide victory over the ruling MDF coalition in 1994, forming a government with their current coalition partners, the Alliance of Free Democrats. Orbán then led his Young Democrats to triumph in 1998, forming a coalition with the Hungarian Democratic Forum. In April 2002, he was defeated in a close race by Socialist candidate Péter Medgyessy, who formed the current coalition government with the Free Democrats. By late 2002, the Hungarian political spectrum had become bipolar, with the Socialists dominating the left and the Young Democrats leading the right.

The Man Behind the Movement.

There is no doubt that Viktor Orbán played a formative role in Hungary’s transition to democracy. In the aftermath of the regime change from communism to democracy in 1990, past political dissidents—Orbán among them—were placed in a unique position of power. Often seen as national heroes, they had become immune to the harsh scrutiny that inevitably awaited one-time members of the Communist party and even leftist politicians. Orbán himself ascended to national renown in 1989 when he was chosen to address a crowd gathered at the ceremonial reburial of

Imre Nagy, at which he made his now-famous demand that Russian troops leave his country. As the leader of FiDeSz following the regime change, he piloted the party on a steady course to the political right. Elected to the office of Prime Minister in 1998 at the tender age of thirty-four, Orbán continued his rightward path from on high.

Those who knew Orbán were familiar with his overarching goal of solidifying the cleavages between left and right in Hungary's political spectrum—a goal he aimed to achieve whatever the cost. Budapest Mayor Gábor Demszky warned of Orbán's "conservative, authoritarian tendencies," and many international observers expressed concern as Orbán grew progressively cozier with the nationalist right.¹

tried to stay as far away as possible."² Is it possible that a new model of grassroots participation and civic engagement will evolve from this mobilization? Could the movement actually signify a deepening of Hungary's democratic culture?

"Go Hungary!" Hungary's fearless leader entered dangerous territory while campaigning for re-election in April 2002, refusing to disassociate his party from the anti-Semitic MI P for fear of losing them as a potential coalition partner. Faced with unexpected defeat in the first round of national elections, Orbán made a desperate attempt to rally support in the two weeks between the election rounds. In this interim period, he waged a caustic campaign against his political "enemies" that shocked many Hungari-

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Still, Orbán surprised onlookers by rapidly mobilizing a broad base of support for his movement, drawing crowds of all ages at several mass rallies in his re-election campaign in April and May 2002. The movement's initial energy led some to predict that, despite the anti-liberal tendencies of its leader, this cloud might have a silver lining.

"This type of mobilization doesn't happen easily in Central Europe," remarked the director of one Budapest foundation, warning me not to dismiss the movement as political indoctrination and nationalist appeals. "This is just a big contrast from twelve years ago when it was not an accepted political value to stand up and be counted," he continued, "when people were wary of politics, and

ans. The core of Orbán's rhetoric was a dogmatic insistence that the left should not be considered a plausible political alternative, and that a vote for the Socialists meant a vote for a return to Communism. He asserted that "the future actually consists of nothing but the past," appealed to Hungarians to "vote for the future," and degraded supporters of the Socialist party as "relics of the past" who lacked national pride.³ Ultimately, his tactics backfired when the nationalist MI P failed to gain the five percent necessary for representation in parliament, leaving FiDeSz unable to form a coalition.

After this upset, Viktor Orbán took to the streets to campaign anew, this time advocating that the ruling coalition be removed from power. What gave teeth to

Orbán's initiative was his call for groups—which he likened to dissident cells active during the Communist era—to be formed around the country. Officially, these groups, which he dubbed “civic circles,” were meant to bring together people concerned with maintaining an understanding of politics and staying abreast of current issues. Nonetheless, when asked about the concrete goals of the “Go Hungary” movement, Orbán insisted vaguely that the movement was to be a political force capable of “amalgamating ideas, values, and noble objectives.” He cited unity, solidarity, and the mobilization of an “organized hinterland” in preparation for the local elections as the movement's most important priorities.⁴

Orbán later focused his attention on protest efforts and calls for Prime Minister Medgyessy's resignation after the rightist publication *Magyar Nemzet* published proof of the Prime Minister's past as a counter-intelligence agent during the Kádár regime.⁵ This strategy backfired when it was revealed that five of Orbán's own Cabinet members had been connected to the communist secret police. Medgyessy, admitting that he should have been “more unambiguous” about his past, insisted that his duties—guarding Hungary's economic secrets as a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Finance—were in no way criminal.

Most recently, FiDeSz representatives have focused their efforts on asserting that President Ferenc Mádly—as opposed to Prime Minister Medgyessy—should sign the European Union accession treaty, asserting that, because accession is a “national issue” that is “above party interests,” the signatory of the accession treaty must “represent the *whole* country.”⁶ Above all, this onslaught reveals

FiDeSz's ongoing campaign to project a false image of the Hungarian state—an image corresponding not to its democratic present, but rather to its Communist past. In fact, the objectives of the “civic forces,” as Orbán often refers to his supporters, are actually strikingly *undemocratic*. Rather than working towards compromise or negotiation, the sole objective of his civic circles has been to destabilize the current government.

A Civic Initiative? I sit down at a large table with Anna and her translator, and both women silently peruse the sheet of prepared questions I have given to them. Anna's translator breaks the ice by answering my question regarding the goals of the movement. “Our purpose is to reflect the lies of the present government,” she says. “We want [Orbán's] government back...We must force [the current leftist coalition] government to accept us...to accept democracy, to accept the rules. We don't want anything bloody, or a revolution, or anything out of the frame of legal means. But our country is divided, and we are being ignored.”

The discussion picks up as members of Anna's civic circle trickle in for the meeting. Even though the large round table at which we sit represents a forum for discussing the future of democracy, each response is loaded with history and rooted in the past. The most basic concern of those present is that the regime change failed to bring about a genuine transfer of power. It is plain from their comments—a deluge of frustration, anger, and vulnerability—that this worry stokes the fire of painful memories.

“We are going back to the same way it was before 1956,” says one man, comparing the current government with the Communist regime. “There is one par-

ty in this country—that is the Socialist party. It is pressed on us.”

“We are sick of the system!” another reports. “We are fed up with not being able to make our voices heard. No one even listens. What we are doing here is a civil rights movement. We are citizens of this nation, and things are done over our head. It is necessary for us to tell the government what we think they are doing wrong, necessary for the world to see what is going on.”

“But what is the *immediate* aim of the movement,” I ask, carefully concealing my frustration. It seems that we are dancing around the issues, that any reference to concrete grievances is some-

uncertainty, suspicion, and distrust that Orbán has manipulated so effectively.

Rhetoric versus Reality. “What makes the Socialists undemocratic, still, now, today?” I ask Tibor, the leader of another civic circle.⁷ He responds, “The leaders grew up during communism; they were faithful to the system. They always think...in undemocratic terms. They don’t know what real democracy means.”

“But isn’t there more to politics now than either being a patriotic Hungarian or being a communist stooge?” I persist. “Is the right side the only side that represents the people?” I am attempting to

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how avoided. There is an uneasy pause in the conversation, and I realize that my impressions are accurate.

“You know, the [civic circle] leaders...will have a big conference soon and work out the details,” responds Anna’s translator dismissively. In fact, the movement’s only objectives seem to consist of mobilizing as many supporters as possible and demonizing the current government, a pursuit which by all objective measures seems unjustified.

So what civil rights *are* they seeking? *How* are they being ignored? What is *not* working in this system? If we pay close attention, it becomes clear that the participants are reworking and retelling their painful history. It is telling that, while Socialists are referred to as “old Communists” or “the enemies,” participants call themselves dissidents. Their words expose the underlying culture of

draw out of him the precise composition or meaning of “civic forces,” which seems intimately linked to a politicized version of national identity or ethnicity.

“Leaders of [civic circles] are afraid that the national identity will fade as a result of these forces,” he responds.

“What forces?” I ask.

“Communist, post-communist, socialist, whatever you want to call them.” He waves his hand, indicating his indifference. “You know, the debate goes back to 1990. FiDeSz wanted to build a political *tabula rasa*, to finish the history that we had been working at for so long, to end communism... The problem is ideas. The [Socialists] never gave up their Communist past,” he concludes, matter-of-factly, “and national identity must be preserved at all costs.”

In reality, the Socialists follow a pro-Europe platform that hardly aspires to

the objectives, policies, or leadership style of the Communist party. After his victory, Prime Minister Medgyessy set out a moderate hundred-day plan based on raising the living standard of Hungary's most disadvantaged groups. Notably, he continued a number of the previous government's programs that Orbán threatened would be stripped away if the Socialists were elected.

The Socialists' response to the "Go Hungary" movement has been to disparage Orbán's strategies and rhetoric, but to recognize protesters' demands for accountability. In July 2002, Medgyessy announced that the government would initiate a new hundred-day program that would enact measures to make the government more transparent and predictable. Despite these attempts at reconciliation, Orbán's movement has been reluctant to recognize even the basic legitimacy of the Socialist government.

Hungary, like the entire region, has confronted formidable development challenges in the short years since the regime change. The period of transition brought both unanticipated economic hardship and a myriad of social ills that strained citizens' patience. Now, instead of seeing these "transition pains" as a result of concrete structural and economic issues, Orbán's followers trace their misfortune to the usual suspects from a bygone era: their own state and its leaders.

Democracy in Danger? It would be easy for us to explain away the unease of these citizens by telling ourselves that history is simply too close, democracy too young. But "transition pains" are only part of the story. It would be a mistake to think that this fear is without meaning, to discount the power contained in this collective insecurity

when it is so well recognized by politicians like Viktor Orbán.

Democracy is composed not only of institutions, but also of beliefs and values. Thus, when we say that democracy "takes time" to develop, we are really referring to the time it takes for people to accept a new core of assumptions and values about the state and society in which they live. Many of Hungary's citizens are trying to believe in democracy, trying to believe that people and ideas can change. Viktor Orbán hinders this acceptance by convincing his supporters that they cannot trust in the present situation, and cannot believe in the democratic state they see before their eyes.

"History is made from within us," Orbán asserted in a speech as Prime Minister, cautioning his people of the dangers of forgetting past suffering.⁸ "If we were to know nothing of history, then we would be like infants—unknowing, and therefore weak and defenseless." He tells them that the past is always with them and that letting their guard down might mean a return to terror and oppression. "History is like an underground river," he says. "If we are ignorant of its nature, it may easily wash away our lives. We might again suffer the pain our forebears have already suffered, and commit the sins already committed by those who came before us." For the sake of the nation, he implies, you must preserve your fears and keep up the guard that you have built up over the years. "Nothing should ever be effaced from the past," he admonishes. "Every piece of it is important." Orbán's message, however unfounded, is clear: the past is the present, and *I* am your future.

Dissenting Opinions. While Orbán gained a significant base of support at the outset of his movement, his following was

by no means universal. As has become the operative rule of Hungarian politics, however, those not emphatically “for” argue steadfastly “against.” “A large portion of [those now in power] grew up in the Kádár regime, and even had promi-

Ku Klux Klan at the same time,” she says. But is it purposeful alienation and neglect that has isolated the civic circles from mainstream politics, or simply their own refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the government?

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nent positions,” asserted one man I interviewed.⁹ “I will loan them my trust, [and accept] that they have changed and are willing to accept democracy. Medgyessy wants to serve Hungary, but a large part of society cannot accept democracy.” A professor agrees, “There is no guarantee that one is good or evil, depending on whether one [was] in or out of the [Communist] Party.”

Another woman feared that the movement’s anti-pluralistic nature would lead to problems. “The danger is of the whole [movement] losing its *raison d’être* after elections,” she said. “The danger is that, if there is only one person who knows ‘the answer’ after the election, this goes against all that we believe [should be part of]...a civil society.”¹⁰

“People will be tired,” concluded another academic. “This sort of mass movement can only succeed in times of great crisis...If normal life is going on, if there is no crisis, it is very difficult to [maintain.]”¹¹

Within the civic circles, responses against these criticisms are fervent. Anna is angry at the censure levied against the movement, reporting that the civic forces she represents have been handed a dual stigma, cast into the role of both oppressed and oppressor. “In Hungary, we are the black sheep and the

“What can the civic circles do to work together with the government?” I ask Anna. Her “Ha!” she cries, “That is impossible! There is no working; there is no compromise. We can’t work with them; we don’t want to, it is impossible.” Momentarily, my eyes come to rest in hers and I can see that any protest or further questioning will go nowhere. More accurately, for Anna, any middle-of-the-road argument simply has nowhere to go. Orbán’s effort to “simplify” the political spectrum into two opposing camps—where former dissidents are presented as the right and the former Communists as the left—leaves his followers with an unequivocal disgust for their leftist “enemies” that shows no signs of abating.

Visions of the Future. At the end of the day, it is clear that what Hungarians really want from democracy is not new ideas, but new opportunities. Socialism instituted a planned system of governance, run by a closed political elite and enforced by the feared secret police, which alienated Hungarians from their state and their countrymen. To overcome the “communist legacy” of distrust and suspicion inspired by the state’s coercive power, Hungary’s government must ask citizens what they want and need to rise

above this troubled past. Besides this, the democratic process should empower citizens, enabling and encouraging them to speak and act autonomously. The government must provide its citizens with the tools they need to rebuild their lives and regain trust in society.

Unfortunately, the polarization of social life stimulated by the doomsday rhetoric of politicians like Orb n has achieved the opposite. The supposed moral dichotomy cleaving left and right ensures that dialogue clings to party lines, bringing the practical value of Hungarians' newly-won freedom of expression into question. This predicament has reawakened the culture of cynicism and distrust from the Communist era. Caught between a troubled past and an uncertain future, citizens of this post-Communist state are obliged to walk an ideological tightrope towards democracy.

The "Go Hungary" movement is neither an anomaly nor a positive sign of civic participation. Rather, it represents a crucial barometer of the political climate in this new democracy. The most destructive aspect of this charismatic leader's extended campaign against his "enemies" is not what he has changed but what he has ensured would remain the same. By unleashing the ghosts of history, Viktor Orb n has succeeded in maintaining the deep divide in Hungarian society, dredging up the culture of distrust, suspicion and dissidence that is the legacy of Hungary's communist past.

For those interested in building democracy, the politics in Hungary provide a chilling reminder that, while communism may be gone, it is surely not forgotten.

Author's Note: Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of contributors.

NOTES

1 Peter Finn, "Hungary's Young 'Tiger' Strong Ally For West Orb n Plays Hard And Makes Enemies," *Washington Post*, 30 January 2000.

2 Interview with author, Budapest, Hungary, 4 June 2002.

3 "Ex-Premier Urges Civic Forces to Prepare for Local Elections," *Magyar T virati Iroda Rt*, 16 June 2002.

4 Ibid.

5 "Interior Minister Reports on Counter-Intelligence Documents," *Magyar T virati Iroda Rt*, 21 June 2002.

6 "Fidesz Says President Should Sign EU Treaty," *Budapest Sun*, 7 November 2002.

7 Interview with author, Budapest, Hungary, 29 July 2002.

8 Speech made by Viktor Orb n at the Opening of the House of Terror in Budapest, Hungary on 24 February 2002.

9 Interview with author, Budapest, Hungary, 24 June 2002.

10 Interview with author, Budapest, Hungary, 25 June 2002.

11 Interview with author, Budapest, Hungary, 24 June 2002.