

Dismantled Democracy, Ungovernable Country: The Derailment of Hungary in the 2000s and Prospects for a Democratic Recovery

Zsolt Boda and Péter Csigó

The recent dismantling of Hungarian democracy has been widely recognised internationally, and associated with a usurpation of power by the ruling right-wing Fidesz party after the 2010 elections. The ease with which Fidesz was able to colonise the state at all levels is shocking indeed, but perhaps even more troubling are the difficulties encountered by actors working on restoring the democratic republic. If the ills of Hungarian democracy had resulted only from the misdeeds of a power-hungry government, they could be healed with relative ease by simply voting out the governing party in the next parliamentary elections in 2014. Our democratic troubles are much deeper, however, and Hungarian voters seem to be well aware of this fact. According to Ipsos, a market research company, support for Fidesz had dropped to just 17% of the country's total population by April 2012, yet this dramatic loss in popularity has not been accompanied by a commensurate increase in support for the MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party), which has been the leading force of Hungary's political left for two decades. Disappointed voters, who have clearly recognised Fidesz's inability to handle the inherited socio-economic crisis, are not willing to return the Socialists to power, whom they still hold responsible for the country's downturn. On the whole, millions of voters today reject both Fidesz and the MSZP, and refuse to engage with either of the two parties which have dominated the Hungarian political landscape since 1989. The traditional antagonism between the nationalist right and the liberal left has ceased to be the sole dominant axis of Hungarian politics.

Indeed, what we are witnessing in Hungary today is not only the weakening of democratic institutions, but the collapse of the coordinates of democratic politics which have been taken for granted hitherto. Fully ignoring (suppressing?) this changeover, mainstream left-liberal politicians and their intellectual supporters would still use their old compasses to sail on the new waters of Hungarian politics. They would convene, as they did in 1992 and 2008, a rainbow coalition of all "democratic forces" in order to stop the juggernaut of authoritarian nationalism. They would legitimate this broad "democratic opposition", as they have done many times before, with references to anti-communist resistance in the 1970s and 1980s (they would call this overall resistance a "Charter", after Václav Havel's Charter 77, and would reanimate the famous 1989 "Opposition Roundtable"). A new popular front against authoritarian nationalism – if only things were so simple!

Unfortunately, the attractive vision outlined above appears to be false and hollow – not only from the point of view of the millions who refuse to restore the Socialist government, but also for an increasing number of young progressives who have chosen to take seriously the collective wisdom of the disaffected masses. This growing movement of progressive democrats finds its representatives in new political parties (the green party, LMP, which received 9% of votes in 2010, and the newly founded 4K!), and in emerging forces of civic resistance (the Milla movement with its 100,000 Facebook members, new networks of students, university teachers, secondary school teachers, and civic organisations like Védegylet).

The actors of democratic renewal may differ in their aims and means; what unites them, however, is their shared reluctance to wage their battles with the government in a common front with the Socialists. These aversions surfaced most

visibly in February 2012, when the LMP and 4K! parties publicly refused to form an “Opposition Roundtable” with the mainstream left. A similar episode occurred in 2011, when the Milla civic movement held its first mass rally. In the days before the event, activists had to prepare for the probable appearance of ex-Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. In the end, the Socialist politician did not show – much to the relief of activists in the crowd who had been prepared to raise a banner behind his back bearing the words: “We Did Not Invite Him”.

If the above, emerging democratic forces have refused to forge a “rainbow coalition” against Fidesz thus far, this is because they see the forces of the mainstream political left (the MSZP, its recently established splinter party Democratic Coalition, and the now-extinct liberal satellite party SZDSZ) as key protagonists and beneficiaries of the very same authoritarian, socially unfair and highly ineffective system that Fidesz has taken over and turned to its own benefit during the last two years. For the new democratic resistance, the mainstream left would be a highly dubious ally in the fight against the mainstream right, since these two have been competing and collaborating factions of the same political cartel for the past fifteen years.

In this article, we would like to familiarise the Western audience with the anti-establishment position of Hungary’s new democratic movements. Seen from this perspective, as we will show, the present state of affairs and prospects for the future appear rather bleak – but not entirely devoid of hope.

The Fidesz regime: the last logical step in Hungary’s authoritarian backslide

Some international readers may find the anti-establishment position outlined above too fatalistic or idealistic to serve as a basis for real political action. After all, isn’t dethroning Prime Minister Orbán the most urgent mission, which should take precedence over other disagreements between relatively more democratic political forces? Such objections are easily justifiable in view of the truly undemocratic developments which have been widely covered internationally. Indeed, Fidesz has crossed boundaries that no previous governments have crossed. Using their two-thirds majority, Fidesz has codified the core elements of its economic policy (e.g. a system of flat taxation) in the constitution, with the obvious aim of obviating any future policy that would deviate from its own. Fidesz has established unprecedented government control over the judiciary and the media, eliminated any meaningful parliamentary checks on legislation, and severely threatened the autonomy of cultural and civic institutions. In light of this well-documented evidence, shouldn’t we still regard the Fidesz regime as a breach of Hungarian democracy rather than a continuation of established practices?

In our view, Fidesz’s anti-democratic policies do not constitute a break with the previous practice; rather, they complete it and amplify it in absurd proportions – and thus also reveal its twisted, immoral and harmful logic. This underlying authoritarian logic, which has shaped Hungarian politics over the last fifteen years, has been widely – and understandably – underemphasised in international coverage of Hungary. By way of example, let us consider a concise article by Kim Lane Scheppele (2012). In connection with an anti-government demonstration in early January 2012, Scheppele forecasted that “an aggressive far-right paramilitary group may show up as well, and it is promising violence. If the government fails to protect the peaceful protestors against such a specific threat announced far in advance, then we are in a different world.” Predictably, we were not protected from the fascists (nor were they protected from us). But nor did we enter a

different world. Indeed, it was only due to luck or providence that January 2012 did not see a repeat of events in 2006. During those protests – against an MSZP government – police first allowed peaceful Fidesz protesters to intermingle with extremists, and then intervened with special forces units, severely and illegally injuring hundreds of peaceful protesters in the crowd. Although the massive scale of the injuries was well documented by journalists (Bodóky 2008), the Socialist prime minister publicly decorated the police officials who had been directly responsible for post-communist Hungary's greatest moral scandal. The same strategic (non-)use of the police in 2006 and 2012 reveals that in the minds of Hungarian political elites the calculable benefits of police (non-)action far outweigh the human rights of protesters.,.

This sad chapter illustrates that a coherent political class has taken shape in Hungary over the last fifteen years, whose left-wing and right-wing factions have been glued together by their common political reflexes, their strongly overlapping ideologies, their shared economic interests, and their common authoritarian efforts to contain non-mainstream political and civil-society rivals. Indeed, the coherence of this political elite manifests itself in a disturbingly wide variety of strongly overlapping policies enacted by governments from both sides over the past two decades. For example, governments of both the left and the right have made large fiscal transfers (exceeding 2% of GDP) to the population in every election year. Every election between 1990 and 2010 in Hungary was preceded by intensive “vote buying” campaigns. In other Central and Eastern European countries, by contrast, political elites have refrained from populist measures of such irrational proportions (Tóth et al. 2009). Another telling example is the area of workfare. Fidesz has been widely criticised for dismantling the integrative welfare state and developing a disciplinary state in which the poor and the unemployed are forced to do menial work in exchange for their social benefits. But it was the Socialists who introduced Hungary's workfare system in 2008 after many years of preparation. Here, we could also refer to Hungarian governments' common tradition of relentlessly applying pressure to independent state institutions (Romhányi 2012), sacrificing policy legislation on the altar of sloganeering (Sepsi-Gáli 2012), diminishing the voice of civil-society organisations (Móra 2012), and so on and so forth. At a recent conference which we organised together with the new civil-society movements, leading experts in some twenty spheres of social life unravelled the same paralysing complicity and collaboration between the mainstream political forces (Boda-Csígó 2012).

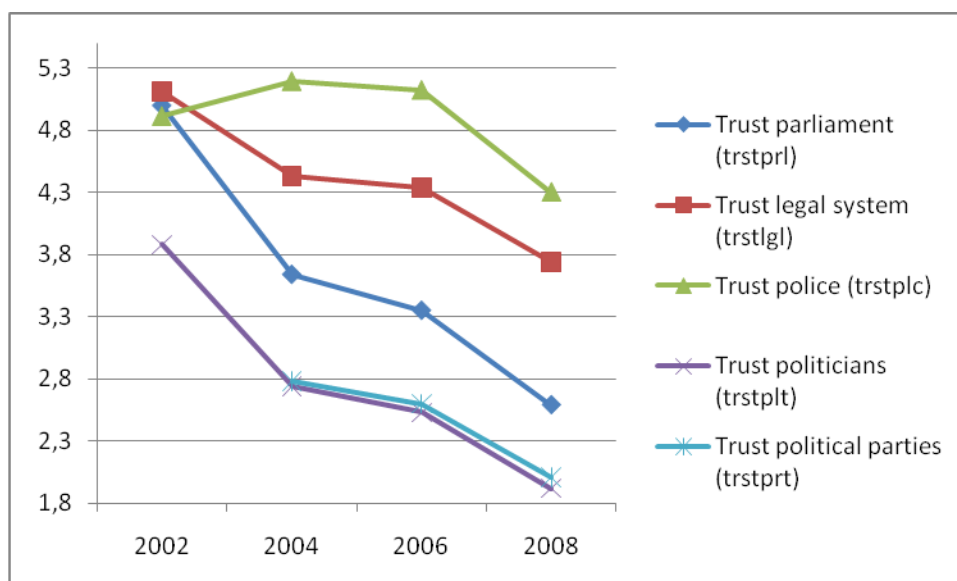
The unusual overlaps between the left-wing and right-wing factions of the political class have necessarily escalated their political antagonism into an unparalleled hysteria. It is a well-documented fact that in the 2000s, political competition has been far more polarised and wicked in Hungary than in neighbouring countries (Körösi 2012). This polarisation was a logical consequence of the common conviction on the part of the MSZP and Fidesz that their cartel-like oligopoly could function tranquilly, without serious challenges from competitors. For more than a decade, the two mainstream parties believed that the country was theirs, that their popular support was steadfast, and that the game was stable. They also knew that Hungarian elections are winner-take-all, due to the majoritarian election system and the constitutionally guaranteed stability of the prime minister's position (through the mechanism of a constructive vote of no confidence). In this context, the politicians of each party conceived of elections as popularity contests within such a stable framework that they could focus exclusively on beating the other side in extremely harsh symbolic battles through which they could reinforce the loyalty of their committed voters and woo the undecided. The resulting flow of reckless accusations, hateful scandals, and remorseless competitions among politicians

to outbid each other's populist promises fulfil a key function in Hungary's political system: to conceal the lack of real competition, to turn attention away from corruption, and to stabilise voter loyalties to both factions of the political cartel.

Since about 2000, the actors of this authoritarian political cartel have been dismantling the weak and vulnerable structures of democratic governance in Hungary. These erosive tendencies have led to tangible, measurable consequences in terms of economic and policy output. The failures of democratic governance – especially the ineffective and corrupt structures of the state – have directly undermined key requirements of sustainable economic development. In consequence, economic growth in Hungary has been the slowest in the Central and Eastern European region. The financial crisis hit Hungary by far the hardest, and only a rescue package from the IMF and the EU averted the country's economic collapse in 2009. As a result, Hungary's external debt grew from 52% of GDP in 2002 to 85% in 2010. Due to falling policy outputs, governments moved further in the direction of authoritarian solutions and tried desperately to achieve spectacular policy results in order to restore their ebbing legitimacy. They hoped their voluntaristic, anti-democratic policies would achieve quick and visible successes, and that in light of such results no one would worry too much about the shadowy details. But this has not happened, and the country's economic and social problems have become deeper and deeper over the past ten years. Under this system of increasingly voluntaristic governance, the allure of quick and visible successes has side-lined the values of continuous, planned, controlled development, leaving an "impotent state" (Gajduschek 2008) and relentless political sloganeering.

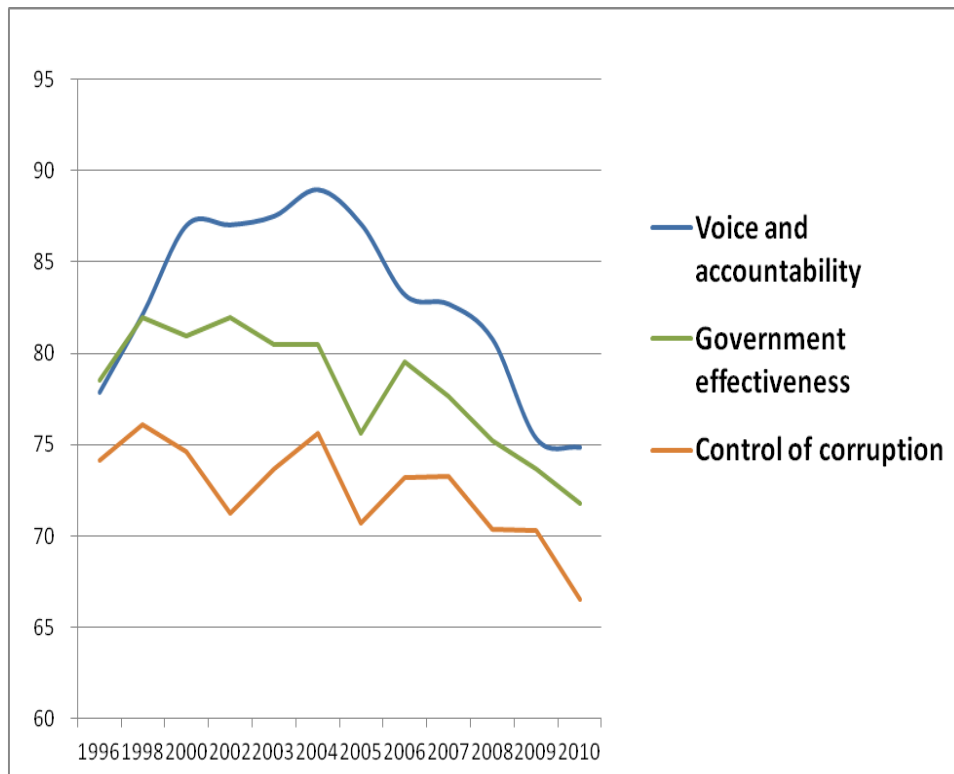
Poor economic performance is thus logically associated with poor governance, and all this has led to an erosion of public trust. The first chart below shows how trust in public institutions declined in Hungary during the 2000s. The second and the third charts show the World Bank's Good Governance Indicators. Five out of the six indicators demonstrate a decline over the past ten years, and one is stagnant. No improvement can be detected.

Chart 1: Institutional trust indicators in Hungary (2002-2008)



(Source: ESS data, Boda – Medve-Bálint, 2010)

Chart 2: Good governance indicators for Hungary (1996-2010)



(Source: World Bank)

Chart 3: Good governance indicators for Hungary (1996-2010)



(Source: World Bank)

The prospects for new democratic forces – traps and hopes

Thus far, we have argued that what we are experiencing today is the collapse of the political cartel that has ruled the country since the 1990s. Fidesz and the MSZP will not disappear, but they will certainly no longer be able to maintain their previous level of support across society. Nor can they maintain the virtual reality which they have built together thus far. The mythical battle of left-liberal modernisers and nationally devoted anti-communists has ceased to function as the sole dominant axis of Hungarian politics. With the shrinkage of this “establishment axis” in the last five years, a new political space has emerged for anti-establishment forces.

Unfortunately, this new space offers far less room for new democratic forces to manoeuvre than one might hope. New progressive parties and movements face the disturbing fact that they have to share the anti-establishment stage with the most shameful phenomenon of Hungarian democracy, the fascist party Jobbik. In today’s parliament, we have two political contenders striving to articulate popular frustrations on a radical anti-establishment basis: the fascist Jobbik and the green, alternative party LMP. These parties form the two poles of a newly emerging “anti-establishment axis”, and offer two radically different visions about the basis for rebuilding the political community. The divergence between Jobbik and LMP could not be sharper: The road offered by the former leads to utter catastrophe, while that of the latter represents the country’s best chance, at present. We should not forget, however, that the energy propelling these two parties in such different directions comes from a common source. Like it or not, Jobbik and LMP share a great deal of their critical engagement against political corruption, anti-democratic governance, cultural alienation, economic exploitation and extreme poverty.

These overlaps are important – not because they represent common ground, but simply because they exist and allow fascists to co-opt many of the progressive issues which LMP and new civil-society movements could effectively address. To cite a very recent example, an LMP politician accused the prime minister in parliament of catering to Fidesz-friendly oligarchs just as the MSZP had catered to its own oligarchy a few years ago. Jobbik reacted immediately by proposing to set up a parliamentary committee. Predictably, Fidesz rejected this motion, and at this point Jobbik stole the show – in its typically twisted way – by placing equal blame on Fidesz for neglecting democratic values and on the democratic system for aiding the powerful against the powerless.

Today’s extremely delicate political situation in Hungary forces anti-establishment democrats into paralysing dilemmas. In opposition to Jobbik demagoguery, they need to argue for the implausible idea that democracy is our only chance (regardless of how it has been abused by the establishment). In opposition to the mainstream left, by contrast, they need to demonstrate that almost everything that has been done in the 2000s under the banner of democracy is unacceptable, and that there is a clear authoritarian trajectory from the MSZP (2002) to Fidesz (2010) to Jobbik (2014?). This two-front campaign pushes radical democratic critiques into a doubly vulnerable position. Mainstream left-wing politicians blame LMP for sharing common ground with Jobbik (although what really happens is that Jobbik exploits the momentum of radical-democratic critiques to its own ends), while Jobbik, Fidesz and their press regularly label LMP or the Milla movement as the “new SZDSZ” – heir to the liberal party which the right sees as representing the hypocritical liberal elite who lecture others on democracy but enjoy privileges which clearly contradict the principles they advocate. In this situation, new democratic forces face extreme difficulties in establishing a space of their own in the political landscape. They are equally chided as radicals and as the new privileged, and they face constant difficulties in defending their core ideal – democracy – both from the

establishment which has exploited and discredited it, and from Jobbik which has shamelessly turned it into its very opposite. Clearly, this is blind alley, but there is a hopeful scenario as well.

If our argument thus far is correct, the most menacing tendencies of today's political anomie – record distrust in politics, 60% of voters without a preferred party, rising extremism – may not emanate only from people's authoritarian attitudes, but also from the fact that the progressive forces which could give a voice to people's genuine frustrations are stuck in the paralysing trap described above. Hungarian society thus may not have stepped beyond its democratic values as self-evidently as Orbán or Jobbik suggest. The hope, then, is that our greatest problems stem less from a lack of democratic energies than from their latency – due to the unstable, vulnerable position of the forces that could genuinely mobilise them.

In light of this trap, it is understandable that so many artists, intellectuals and experts who see Fidesz as an immediate tragedy and the MSZP as its direct antecedent would not want to stand up and expose themselves to the controversies discussed above. This is why no ideological ground has yet taken shape in the vital spheres of culture, the media, journalism and science on which a democratic and radical critique of the establishment could be cultivated. What we need most is for progressive democrats in all these spheres to stand up and associate with other potential facilitators – doctors, teachers, priests and shopkeepers – who can spread the ferment in local communities. If these self-mobilising opinion leaders recognise themselves as a large enough crowd, as a critical mass of desperate democrats, they could forge a centre of gravity, a new pole in Hungarian civic and public life, strong enough to defend its core ideal of radical democratic renewal from attacks by authoritarian competitors. If the rising civil-society movements and political parties succeed in persuading their civic and intellectual supporters to wake up and coalesce, the strength of this emerging movement could gradually dissolve the present paralysis of radical democratic politics. Such a virtuous circle is not entirely implausible, in our view. To the contrary, in the past twenty years the chances for a widespread radical democratic movement to emerge in Hungary have never been as high as they are today.

Absent a progressive, democratic base of support, however, LMP and any other new party or civic movement can hardly offer an effective answer to the mass discomfort caused by the anti-democratic and socially unfair structures which emerged in the 2000s. Until the cultural and social forces striving for progressive democratic renewal can coalesce and form a visible pole in Hungarian public discourse, the emergent anti-establishment axis of Hungarian politics will remain severely imbalanced. Absent a well-defined centre of gravity at its progressive pole, the anti-establishment axis will favour Jobbik disproportionately, far beyond the level at which its fascist and irredentist policies are actually supported in Hungarian society.

Zsolt Boda is senior research fellow at the Institute of Political Science, Hungarian Academy of Sciences and associate professor at the Corvinus University of Budapest. He is a visiting lecturer at the Université Pierre et Marie Curie (Paris 6). He has researched and published extensively both in Hungarian and English on issues of globalisation, public policy, and the governance problématique. He is also one of the leaders at Protect the Future – Védegylet, a green NGO which lobbied successfully for the establishment of the Ombudsman for Future Generations in Hungary, and which served as a cradle for LMP – Politics Can be Different, the Hungarian green party.

Péter Csigó is a Hungarian sociologist and media researcher. Peter is a member of the MOKK Media Research Centre at Budapest University of Technology. As a researcher, Peter is mainly interested in the mediatisation and marketisation of politics and the future of democracy in late modern societies, but he has equally researched the issues of cultural stratification, everyday media usage and online television. As an activist, Peter is member of the Milla civic movement.

References

- Boda, Zsolt – Csigó, Péter (2012): A színlelt demokrácia 10 éve: ennyi nem elég? (nemtetszikarendszer.blog.hu)
- Boda, Zsolt – Medve-Bálint, Gergő (2010): "Institutional trust in Hungary in a comparative perspective: an empirical analysis", in Füstös László – Szalma Ivett (eds.): *European Social Register 2010: Values, Norms and Attitudes in Europe* (Budapest: MTA PTI and MTA SZKI, 2010), 184-202.
- Bodoky, Tamás (2008): *Túlkapások*. Budapest: Elektromédia Kft
- Gajduschek György (2008): *Rendnek lennie kellene* (Budapest, Magyar Közigazgatási Intézet)
- Körösenyi, András (2012): "A politikai polarizáció és következményei a politikai elszámoltathatóságra. Magyar politika, 1990-2010", in Boda, Zs. – Körösenyi, A. (eds.): *Trendek a magyar politikában* (Budapest: Új Mandátum Kiadó, forthcoming)
- Móra, Veronika (2012): "A civil szektor elsorvasztása – vagy elsorvadása?", presentation given at the conference *Lebontott demokrácia, kormányozhatatlan ország: a magyar demokrácia kisiklása*, 02. 03. 2012 Budapest, Merlin Színház
- Scheppele, Kim Lane (2012): The Unconstitutional Constitution. (<http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com>)
- Romhányi, Balázs (2012): A független intézmények védtelensége (<http://nemtetszikarendszer.blog.hu>)
- Sepsi, Tibor – Gáli, Csaba (2012): Tervbe ment füst. (<http://igyirnankmi.hvg.hu>)
- Tóth István György – Bartha Attila – Gál Róbert Iván – Kolosi Tamás – Nagy Katalin – Palócz Éva – Szívós Péter (2009): *Váltoállítást: szemléletváltás és megvalósítható intézményi reformok egy fenntartható növekedési pálya érdekében* (Budapest: TÁRKI Zrt. és Kopint-TÁRKI Zrt.)