



Conference organized by Védegylet (Protect the Future), the One Million for the Freedom of the Hungarian Press Movement and the Heinrich Böll Foundation

The State and Future of Democracy in Hungary and CEE - Ways out of the crisis

Date: 4 October 2012 (13.30 until 21.00)

Venue: Bazaar Klub, Dohány utca 22-24, Budapest

BACKGROUND

The latest phase of the global economic crisis in Europe – predominantly driven by concerns over the structure of public spending and the sustainability of sovereign debt – has revealed serious problems with the functioning of liberal democratic political systems in all corners of the “old continent”. These problems were perhaps most blatantly exposed by the arrival of technocratic caretaker governments in Greece and Italy, two countries where market forces – not voters – unseated governments.

The tension between the fundamental democratic ideal of “popular sovereignty” and the need for “responsible and efficient governance” had, however, already surfaced several years earlier in Central Europe, a region which had no or very little experience with liberal democracy before the collapse of socialist regimes in 1989/1990. Although the Visegrád four were praised for the “quick and successful” introduction of market-based economic systems and the *acquis communautaire*, those living in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary were painfully aware of the shortcomings of the new political system: blatant corruption and nepotism, the overwhelming influence of private interests on policy-makers, unfair tax regimes, etc.

Central European societies reacted in different ways to the emerging political crisis. One of the most distinctive political alternatives to emerge was formulated by nationalist conservatives who attempted to fundamentally reshape and refocus the strategy of the political right in the region. This attempt has proven (thus far) most successful in Hungary where Viktor Orbán built his System of National Cooperation on Hungarians' bruised sense of pride and a populist style bent on maximising his and his party's appeal. The political project behind this façade is based on a pessimistic reading of liberal democracy and a reinterpretation of democratic politics according to which the task of reuniting a deeply divided political community can only be achieved through a form of (nationalist) collectivism represented by a strong political party and leader.

The debates surrounding the far-reaching political reforms introduced by Hungary's right-wing government (the citizenship and media laws, as well as its new constitution) have opened a space for critical reflection – not only on the current government's policies, but also on the two decades of democratic construction that preceded them. Védegylet (Protect the Future), the One Million for the Freedom of the Hungarian Press Movement and the Heinrich Böll Foundation would like to seize the opportunity to reflect on the state of democracy in the region and on the prospects for democratic development in Hungary. What are the main shortcomings of the democratic process in different Central European countries and what are the conditions for democratic renewal in the region, and in particular in Hungary? Is there a chance for increasing citizens' commitment to democracy and for reaching some kind of minimal consensus on the way forward between actors on different sides of the political spectrum? How can social movements contribute to the reinvigoration of democratic life? These questions will be addressed with the help of participants coming from Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Whereas the first part of the program will be centred around an expert discussion focusing on the state of democracy in the region, the second part will take as point of departure the “Hungarian Octopus”, an on-line communication tool developed with the help of dozens of leading policy experts and designed to highlight the different dimensions of the democratic crisis gripping Hungary. The hope of the project's initiators and the conference's organizers is that this interactive and multi-layered problem map will focus public attention on the critical issue of democratic governance and thereby enrich the debate on the desirable path for political development in Hungary and elsewhere.

PROGRAM

13.30 – 13.55	Registration
14.00 – 14.15	Welcome Zsolt Boda , Spokesperson, Védegylet, Budapest Ralf Fücks , President of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Berlin Péter Juhász , One Million for the Freedom of the Hungarian Press Movement, Budapest
14.15 – 14.30	Introductory remarks Elemér Hankiss , Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Institute of Political Sciences, Budapest
14.30 – 16.00	Panel I: The State of Democracy in CEE Speakers Gabriella Ilonszki , Corvinus University, Budapest Michał Kozłowski , Faculty of Philosophy, University of Warsaw Ondřej Císář , Charles University, Prague Martin M. Šimečka , journalist, Bratislava, tbc Chair: Zsolt Boda , Védegylet, Budapest

Guiding questions: What are the main shortcomings of the democratic process in Central and Eastern Europe? How have Hungarian, Polish, Czech and Slovak citizens reacted to these? Is there a general trend of turning away from politics? Are there any new social movements that seek to address the crisis of democracy?

16.00 – 16.30

Coffee break

16.30 – 18.30
Hungary

Panel II: The Future of Democracy and the Role of the New Social Movements in

Presentation of the “Hungarian Octopus” project by

Zsolt Boda, Védegylet (Protect the Future), Budapest

Péter Csigó, One Million for the Freedom of the Press in Hungary Movement, Budapest
and the experts participating in the project

Discussants

Kornélia Magyar, Hungarian Progressive Institute, Budapest

Bálint Ablonczy, Heti Válasz weekly, Budapest

Péter Rauschenberger, philosopher, Budapest

Chair: **Balázs Tóth**, Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Budapest

Guiding questions: Why did the democratic transition fail in Hungary and what role did the political class play in the derailment of democracy? How can a real democracy be built and what are the key conditions for democratic renewal? Is there a chance for building a minimal consensus between political actors committed to democracy?

18.30 – 18.45

Closing Remarks by the Organizers

19.00 – 21.00

Reception

Working languages: Hungarian/English (simultaneous translation)

Contact person: Zsolt Boda (spokesperson, Védegylet): bodazsolt@yahoo.com

*The event is open to all interested. Pre-registration by email is not required.