

# There Will Be a Liberal East-Central Europe Again!



\*  
GÁBOR  
HORN

**A**fter the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a distinct need for the achievements of liberalism. The parties that embraced the rights, freedoms, and the values of a market economy enjoyed more significant voter support, while the non-liberal parties viewed some liberalized basic values as self-evident.

Living in Prague, Berlin or Budapest in 1989 was liberating and intoxicating. Neither my generation, nor the one before us believed that the Soviet soldiers would leave the country and that the communist nightmare would come to an end. Just like for Budapest, called at that time the “Happiest Barrack” in the Soviet Bloc, the same disbelief was felt in Honecker’s DDR or Ceausescu’s Romania, a country suffering from even greater atrocities than the rest of the region. In all these states, even if to different degrees, communism made freedom and the hope of a western life impossible.

On the one hand, the popularity of basic liberal values in the post-communist states is related to the fact that most countries of the region actually had liberal opposition (except the Polish movements, which had a rather complex identity) so the voters also viewed them as the strongest anti-communist forces.

On the other hand, there was an unwavering consensus about basic liberal values – except the extremist parties, as well as regards the fact that belonging to the European Union is gratifying and valuable with all its opportunities and obligations.

All of this ended with the worldwide economic crisis in 2008, in the aftermath of which the popularity of far-right parties rose and certain central-European conservative parties radicalized. Although in different national parliaments and – to a lesser

degree – in Brussels, illiberal politics have a scenic appeal, social-psychological researches prove that in moral questions central-European citizens decide based on liberal values. Without question, among the young population, the desire of freedom is the guiding principle.

At the end of the 1980s, the unbearability of the communist system became clear in every country of the Eastern Block. The helpless indulgence of the Soviet Union strengthened this phenomenon – for example, in certain countries (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany, Poland), the Soviet soldiers were strictly prohibited to intervene. A few years earlier, this would have been unimaginable. The sudden freedom was unexpected to those who did not live among active oppositionists or those who were proficient in international politics. The accelerating disintegration of state socialism was smooth to varying degrees in different countries.

In Poland, in the summer of 1988, Lech Wałęsa, the founder of Solidarity, was invited

”

IN DIFFERENT  
NATIONAL  
PARLIAMENTS AND –  
TO A LESSER DEGREE  
– IN BRUSSELS,  
ILLIBERAL POLITICS  
HAVE A SCENIC  
APPEAL



IN BULGARIA,  
CZECHOSLOVAKIA,  
HUNGARY,  
AND THE GERMAN  
DEMOCRATIC  
REPUBLIC,  
THE ONE-PARTY  
SYSTEM DEGRADED  
GRADUALLY,  
AND MORE OR LESS  
WITHOUT VIOLENCE

to negotiate with the communist leaders, which was followed by the inauguration of the first anti-communist prime ministership of Tadeusz Mazowiecki in the spring of 1989. While this process was not free of political or street conflict, it showed conspicuous differences compared to the 1970s.

At the same time, in Romania, dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu won yet another election and continued on his path of the exploitation of police forces – including the arrest of László Tőkés, a Hungarian ethnic dissident pastor. The communist regime tried to deaden the rebellion (which started in Timisoara) at first to obey Mr. Ceaușescu's commands. Then, on the sixth day of the demonstration, the police forces stopped following orders after the suicide of the defense minister, Vasile Milea. Eventually, Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife were executed.

In Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic, the one-party system degraded gradually, and more or less without violence. While the formation of a new political system needed many closed-door negotiations, the general public remembers the change of the regime as a symbolic event, which embodied the desire of freedom.

Irrespective of how the liberal parties performed in the first democratic elections in respective countries of the post-Soviet bloc, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reburial of Imre Nagy and other martyrs, or the Velvet Revolution meant an unimaginable liberation from the oppression or national terror. So, regardless of who voted for which party, the freedom – which the previously mentioned events stood for – was one of the most important and inalienable basic values for the whole region. In Hungary, for instance, most of the society greeted the change of a regime with euphoria, which showed in the – still unprecedented – civil and political activity. Numerous civil organizations and trade unions were formed. Many people joined the newfound democratic parties. The appealing status of political presence showed in the high numbers of voter turnout throughout the region.

Those who had earlier been important figures of the opposition became the leaders of the new political systems. In 1989 in Czechoslovakia, Václav Hável, who was formerly banned from writing in his own country, was elected president. In 1990, in Poland, so was Lech Wałęsa. That same year in Hungary, Árpád Göncz, the hero of the 1956 revolution, also took the helm as the head of state.

During the first free elections in all former Soviet states, liberal parties were very popular. In Hungary, two parties (SZDSZ, Alliance of Free Democrats and Fidesz, Alliance of

Young Democrats) obtained seats in parliament, while in Czechoslovakia liberals had the majority in both regions of the country (Civic Forum in Czechia and Public Against Violence in Slovakia). In the once eastern-German provinces, the conservative-liberal parties won without exception. In Poland, in the Lower House of parliament (Sejm), liberal-Christian-democratic and social-democratic parties received the most votes, while Solidarity became the second most powerful force in the Senate.

With the transition from communism, the liberal world and its attachments became a part of everyday life for the citizens of the former Eastern Bloc. The basic rights, freedom of speech and assembly, all parts of the democratic life became undeniable. Private property – apart from the obvious financial value – gained an intellectual meaning. Entrepreneurs' success in the market was now driven solely by their talent and endurance. Finally, trust in capitalism emerged, creating chiefly positive connotations in the minds of most of Eastern European society. In the 1990s, far-right parties reappeared – only now they identified their main enemy as globalism instead of communism. The normative liberal forces – reflecting on the political turn of the last ten years – did not give the most effective answer to the appearance of emotional and economical anti-Westernism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia. Although parties with a far-right agenda entered parliament, they were not a significant force. Wanting to catch up with the West, the newly formed national governments were working hard to get the countries of the Eastern Block to join NATO and the European Union (EU) as soon as possible, which happened soon thereafter. In addition to economic recovery and new opportunities for all post-Soviet states and their citizens, these developments further strengthened the fundamental importance of freedom among public opinion.



WITH  
THE TRANSITION  
FROM COMMUNISM,  
THE LIBERAL WORLD  
AND ITS ATTACHMENTS  
BECAME A PART  
OF EVERYDAY LIFE  
FOR THE CITIZENS  
OF THE FORMER  
EASTERN BLOC

At the time of accession, the EU enjoyed widespread popularity in Central European societies. The majority supported these attempts even in those countries where political parties regarded as problematic from the Brussels' perspective were the most successful.

However, recently, the spread of illiberalism, a phenomenon frequently discussed in relation to Hungary, may now be observed in other countries (including Poland).

### **DISRUPTING THE LIBERAL CONSENSUS**

The Great Recession in 2008 wrecked Hungary's economy, which – among other reasons – caused the socialist-liberal coalition government to lose the trust of the people<sup>1</sup>. The referendum of 2008, which

<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the 2008 financial crisis cannot be compared to the loss in human capital and economic prosperity caused by the communist regimes in the region.

had become a keystone of the then government's downfall, proved that in regards to certain questions, people were reluctant to approve of reforms and a capitalist attitude, and instead required the assistance and intervention of a strong state<sup>2</sup>.

Those who lost the most in the crisis became severely vulnerable, which greatly contributed to the 2010 success of the Fidesz party and its moderate, catch-all promises, along with the far-right Jobbik party with its anti-bank rhetoric.

Meanwhile, one of the most important Hungarian parties of the regime change of 1989-90 – the Alliance of Free Democrats – had lost its political weight and was dissolved. The aforementioned 2010 election brought about the crisis of liberalism in Hungary. Noteworthy, it was not only because of its winner – the populist Fidesz party, but also because it was symptomatic – the media wrote about the voters of green parties and LMP (which is a globalization- and EU-critical party) as the orphans of voters of the Alliance of Free Democrats. This diagnosis was a rather good reflection of the liberal voters' options at the time.

In the campaigns of the right-wing parties, banks or the International Monetary Fund were made to represent the real fight for people's hearts and minds.. To Fidesz (Alliance of Young Democrats), Jobbik (For a Better Hungary), and part of their voters, the banks, the EU, and the international funds were deemed as the institutionalization of liberal views and their financial collapse.

<sup>2</sup> According to a 2010 Pew Research Study, in 2010, 72% of Hungarians said that the country was worse off economically as under Communism.: See: Wike, R. (2010) *Hungary Dissatisfied with Democracy but Not Its Ideals*. Available [online]: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2010/04/07/hungary-dissatisfied-with-democracy-but-not-its-ideals/>



WITHOUT REALIZING IT OR REFLECTING IT IN THEIR VOTES, MOST HUNGARIANS ENJOY THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE FREE WORLD

The second Fidesz-government had a very popular slogan: "The last eight years", which was not only a generalized condensation, but also the onset of the politics revolving around attacking the banking sector and international institutions, like the IMF. These kinds of attacks became more forthright and frequent as Viktor Orbán's government moved toward a more manifest nationalism during and after the 2015 refugee crisis. One of the most infamous ones was the government's poster-campaign against George Soros and Brussels.

Later, the Fidesz party further disrupted liberalism and the authority of the West in the eyes of Hungarian citizens. Meanwhile, through its economic relations, the government got the idea of opening the country and thus started emphasizing the importance of a friendly relationship with Russia. With the so-called 'Eastern Opening' the government tried to expand Hungary's economic opportunities, but at the same time relativized Western values and liberal civic liberties.

Since 2010, the continuously changing political system under the rule of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his acolytes has less and less liberal elements. While during the second election term of the Fidesz-government the familiar, moderate, conservative figures still played significant roles, they gradually disappeared from the political scene. In 2014, Viktor Orbán himself described his regime as 'illiberal'. However, many people in the European People's Party are still, even today, reluctant to recognize the real nature of Mr. Orbán's system.

According to Viktor Orbán himself, the main reason behind the conflict is the different attitudes towards immigrants and refugees. The successful fight against immigration in the 2014 election shows that Hungarian society has no need for a liberal approach toward certain human rights issues.

At the same time, it is spectacular that, if the concept is not conscious – not only as regards moral issues, but also in day-to-day politics – the majority of voters represent a liberal standpoint, regardless of party sympathies, as evidenced by the response to the idea of the internet tax and the closure of shops on Sundays<sup>3</sup>.

Without realizing it or reflecting it in their votes, most Hungarians enjoy the achievements of the free world – from the sacredness of privacy, to the variety of goods in the shops. Due to the fact that they do not want to give up the rights they fought to gain thirty years ago, we can trust in the recovery of liberalism<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The 2014 Internet tax proposal triggered massive protests in Budapest. As a result, the government withdrew the proposal. Apart from this, the socialist party initiated a referendum against the mandatory closure of shops on Sundays – the government revoked that plan as well.

<sup>4</sup> The results of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections confirm this phenomenon, as the left-liberal Democratic Coalition and the liberal Momentum Movement parties became the major forces of the opposition

According to János Kis, a former leader of the democratic opposition and an influential contemporary philosopher:

*"In a democracy based on the competition of parties, the party that casts the majority in the elections will become the government; the minority will be the opposition of the government. Although the opposition doesn't have a part in governing, it can hold the government accountable. They are the public power factor that can force the government to defend its decisions in public debate; they can push the government to a certain degree of self-restraint. But whether or not to withhold unprotected decisions, they can make it easier for voters to make informed decisions in the next elections"<sup>5</sup>.*

We cannot see anything from this system today – on the national and local level, the government's overt power is not constrained by democratic competition described above. Just like it was not granted in the three decades after 1956, during the dictatorship of János Kádár, when there were also sham elections. The Hungarian system is increasingly moving towards a 'state capitalist' model, where the power of state market distortion rivals the socialist era.

## **FAILED POPULIST REVOLUTION AND LIBERAL CHALLENGERS OF ILLIBERALISM**

This temporary disillusionment could be an important learning period for those who undertake the task of making freedom a political asset. The liberal Momentum party, well represented in the 2019 European Parliament election, devotes great energy to building a nation-wide base, trying to outperform the Alliance of Free Democrats,

– instead of the nationalist, far-right Jobbik (For a Better Hungary), or the anti-capitalist, anti-globalist LMP (Another Politics is Possible).

<sup>5</sup> Kis, J. (2013) "Gondolatok a demokráciáról", [in]: *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 57(19), p. 5. [in Hungarian]



## THE HUNGARIAN SYSTEM IS INCREASINGLY MOVING TOWARDS A 'STATE CAPITALIST' MODEL, WHERE THE POWER OF STATE MARKET DISTORTION RIVALS THE SOCIALIST ERA

whose voters – after 2002 – have been mainly residents of Budapest. The party's promising presence (which was founded by intellectuals who studied in the west) shows that for university students and young workers, freedom, the European Union, and Western values are still unquestionable.

While the Austrian, Italian, and Polish allies of Viktor Orbán still had electoral support in the last elections, the year of the rebellion did not fully come true in 2017, nor since then. Following the French and Austrian presidential elections and Dutch parliamentary elections, the 2019 European Parliament elections also demonstrated the failure of a right-wing populist takeover. Whereas in Hungary, Fidesz achieved great success, in Poland, the main opposition party, Civil Platform (which is somewhat critical of PM Orbán) defeated the ruling Law and Justice party, which was becoming more and more extremist. The failed populist electoral rebellion, as well as the ongoing migration in

the EU, the Western values, and experiences of the Hungarian voters, give hope to the liberal advocates of Hungary.

All in all, we can trust – and that is what we need to work towards – that the European community, which has been protecting its members for more than seven decades since the Second World War, has made human rights declared and preserved. Despite the unnecessary administrative regulations, the European Union also let the market live and has an appeal to citizens who lost their freedom. These dissatisfied people can herd their country to a self-correcting path as soon as they have an opportunity and a liberal European institutional framework is granted.

With the loss of liberalism, Hungary has wasted some valuable time that is yet to come. It will take years of hard work to rebuild a stable liberal democracy again. Nevertheless, as Western values and individual freedoms are still respected by major societal groups in Hungary, it is my unshakable faith that it is going to happen.



GÁBOR HORN

Chairman of the Board at Republikon Foundation since 2010. At the time of the regime change, he was a prominent figure of the union movements. After that he joined the SZDSZ (the Alliance of Free Democrats) and became an MP in 1994 and the campaign director of the party. Between 2002 and 2008 he worked as under-secretary for coordination in the Hungarian Prime Minister's office as well. For 10 years, he was teaching economics and finance and then took part in the founding of the Economic Polytechnic Foundation School, where he worked as director of the curriculum until 2002

