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HUNGARY – THE CASE OF A POST-COMMUNIST SOCIETY IN CRISIS

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Introduction

In the twenty year history of post-communist societies and regimes in the east European space, Hungary stands out as a challenging and interesting case. On the one hand, it underwent a peaceful, gradual collapse and handover of power from communist to opposition forces in 1989, prompting one leading western observer to coin the process “a negotiated revolution.” On the other hand, Hungary currently represents the most extreme case among its neighbors in the emergence of right-wing, xenophobic and antisemitic forces, including a strong tendency toward historical revisionism and nostalgia for the dark days of fascist movements and their symbols. At the same time, Hungary was leading the way in the area in assuming historical responsibility for the Holocaust in Hungary, and in incorporating that chapter in its history in the educational system.

The objective of this brief is to present the warning signs that have emerged from Hungary since autumn 2006 until late summer 2009 and to analyze the ability of the young democracy to cope with elements that are destabilizing its society and testing the limits of free speech – all this against the backdrop of the world economic crisis.

If historians justifiably consider the 1956 Hungarian uprising as the beginning of the end of the communist system, then the seeds of the present crisis in Hungary were sown during the events of October–November 2006, when the 50th anniversary of that event was commemorated. Moreover, just as the 1956 uprising reflected the deep frustrations and opposition that communism caused, in October–November 2006, conservative and right-wing elements lashed out with full force against the ruling Socialists, accusing them of lying to the public, of deceiving the people, and of being, in fact, crypto-Communists. Although the behavior of the conservative FIDESZ was not that of a "loyal opposition" party in the traditional western sense of the phrase, the alliance was careful to keep its distance from the extremists, who employed antisemitic slogans and whose violence tested the limits of power

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of the police, who in turn were accused of applying brutal force against the demonstrators. The opposition and the extremists were unsuccessful in their attempts to topple the Socialist government and advance a general election. However, they continue to press for early elections.

Main elements of the crisis and their manifestations

- Hungarian politics is highly polarized, between the "left" as represented by the governing Hungarian Socialist Party, and the "right," from the "center-right" FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats) – the probable winner in the 2010 general elections – through a range of right-wing groups to the extreme right, among which Jobbik (the Movement for a Better Hungary) is the most prominent, having sent three representatives to the Euro-Parliament.
- The political discourse has deteriorated and became more violent – verbally, and increasingly physically – as manifested in the recent murder of six Roma in the past year. Employing populist rhetoric, the right wing accuse the Socialists of being heirs to the communist nomenklatura, with the country being led by an elite of "socialist millionaires" who have ruined the country's economy and destroyed the "simple Hungarian." With the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008, both the nationalist-right wing and the small extreme left attacked the globalized economy and the foreign interests that were said to be exploiting Hungary. From here the road to antisemitic attacks on the role of Jewish-Israeli interests in the property market – including fancy malls, allegedly controlled by "Jewish money" and to which innocent Hungarians are lured – was a short one. Furthermore, the right-wing extremist discourse identifies "soc-liberals" with the Jews, and Jewish interests.
- Nationalist sentiments and frustrations have aroused irredentist calls in relation to Hungarians in neighboring countries, especially Slovakia and Romania. Recent tensions between Hungary and Slovakia over this issue are being used by extremists on both sides to fuel nationalist sentiments, and the dispute between them appears to be one of the most acute among neighboring EU members.
- The events of October 2006 have proved that there is a strong sub-culture comprising various social groups and sub-groups, from elderly pensioners to violent, unemployed, uneducated youth. By engaging in street battles with the police, the latter, in particular, are openly challenging the forces of law and the stability of the

young Hungarian democracy. As a social underclass they are the victims of the transformations that the society has undergone since 1989, those who feel they were left behind in the race for materialism, and as such can be easily manipulated by extremists. They are the first to agree with the antisemitic slogans and then to raise their fists against the Jewish-Communists allegedly ruling the country.

- The Hungarian Guard (Magyar Garda), a paramilitary-type organization with local chapters, reminiscent of the German Freikorps, was formed in 2007 in order to "guard the interests of the Hungarian nation." The shiny uniforms with their nationalist- and fascist-type emblems have aroused a heated debate over the extent to which historical memory of such symbols bear with them messages for today. The very creation of the Guard and its open game with the legal authorities to evade dissolution and prohibition is a development without parallel in other post-communist countries. The Guard is composed of members from a variety of social backgrounds, united by dissatisfaction with the "soc-liberals" and a nationalist, xenophobic outlook. Despite lengthy legal struggles against local and national chapters of the Guard, no ban had been imposed by late summer 2009. While the Hungarian Guard has not made any clearly antisemitic statements, individual members from local chapters in and outside Budapest are known to have participated in demonstrations with antisemitic messages. Xenophobic, anti-Roma attitudes are clearly evident, and numerous reports suggest that the Roma are targets of the Hungarian Guards. In the resulting clashes, each side has accused the other of violence.
- Following the formation of the Guard, it became apparent that its views were infiltrating key bodies, such as the leadership of the Trade Union of the Hungarian Police Force, some of whom were revealed as Guard members; this phenomenon is unknown in any other European country. In parallel, the country witnessed the emergence of the Jobbik movement, with its xenophobic, antisemitic websites, three members in the Euro-Parliament, and good chances of entering the Hungarian parliament. The fact that some 15 percent of Hungarian votes to the European Parliament went to Jobbik raised many eyebrows in Hungary, as well as in the West. Since the nationalist, anti-Roma, antisemitic themes of Jobbik are expressed openly and clearly, it should be no consolation that this development is seen by major media outlets as part of the "turn to the right" in Europe.

- There is a growing targeting of Jewish issues, in which historical nostalgia for elements of the dark past are combined with contemporary accusations of "Jewish lobby" or "Mossad activities," or even "Israeli soldiers" infiltrating Hungary. While there has been no rise in physical attacks against Jews, and Israeli and Jewish targets are well guarded, noisy demonstrations, often in a "flash-mob" style outside Jewish facilities such as synagogues, have become more frequent.

Response of main political parties and the authorities

- The leaders of FIDESZ eventually condemned extremism, but – some opponents claim – with a meaningful delay, as if reluctantly. There is no doubt that they fear the rising extremist challenge, but FIDESZ has to consider its own political interests: to compete with Jobbik for the votes of the right, to deny readiness to cooperate with the left against the right, and to present a Christian-conservative agenda.
- The Socialists, along with their now fragmented partners, the liberal SzDSz (Alliance of Free Democrats), did conduct a relentless campaign against the rise of extremism. Significant circles of Hungarian intellectuals, not necessarily associated with the Socialists, have expressed their alarm in liberal forums such as the daily *Nepszabadsag*, the weekly *168Ora* and *Elet es Irodalom*. Constituting a powerful moral voice, they often recall the Jewish fate in the Holocaust and condemn all forces of racism, xenophobia and nostalgia for the fascist past. Significant segments of civil society feel a sense of frustration and shame that Hungary was chosen in August 2009 by neo-Nazis in Europe to commemorate the memory of Rudolf Hess, an event subsequently prohibited by the authorities.
- The legal authorities have shown signs of weakness in the face of rising violence and the emergence of possible "death squads" responsible for the killing of Roma citizens in 2008/9. As in other post-communist societies, there have been endless debates on "freedom of speech," which have slowed down the machinery of justice. Hungarian President Laszlo Solyom was criticized, and some in the country even called for his resignation, due to his slowness in condemning the wave of extremism and anti-Roma violence.

Conclusion

Hungary is facing its gravest crisis since the downfall of communism, and the world economic crisis cannot serve to explain its depth and nature. Civil society is facing the

difficult challenge of barring the extremists from turning Hungary into a battleground marked by rising physical violence.

Despite the burdensome past, the hope is that with the growing participation of the post-communist generation, the young democracy will find the ways and means to cope with the crisis. At the same time, Hungarian society is becoming increasingly aware that while maintaining law and order may help solve the immediate problem of violence, the real challenge is to confront the roots of the crisis – social issues connected to the Roma, and the continuing fascination with racism and fascist ideas and symbols.

The question often posed by observers is "why Hungary?" There is no definitive answer to this conundrum, but it seems that the attitude toward non-democratic groups plays a major role in the current crisis. It appears that one of the fundamental goals of post-communist liberal, democratic forces, that of "progressing while cleaning up and coping with the pages of our dark history," has not been achieved in Hungary, since those with a nostalgia for the past and a refusal to learn from it not only have not been brushed into the dustbin of history but have risen up and challenged the authority of the fragile democracy by manipulating the grievances of those left behind by the post-communist processes.

Hungary has served several times as a barometer for events that have occurred in central and east European history. It displayed the most extreme form of national revolt against the House of Habsburg in 1848; it established the first communist regime outside of Russia in 1919, which held power for three months; it exhibited the most extreme forms of right-wing ideologies during World War II, with the short-lived Arrow Cross rule and cooperation with Nazi Germany in the destruction of its Jewry; it was the forerunner to the collapse of the communist regimes with the 1956 Revolution; and it was the first to dismantle the Iron Curtain in 1989. Is Hungary again leading the way in Europe with its dangerous, negative trend of extremism and xenophobia?