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## **50 Years Later, Hungary Commemorates Anniversary of October Uprising**

### **- AN ANNIVERSARY ABOUT DEMOCRACY**

On Monday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, Hungary commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the renowned revolution that took place in 1956. The October Uprising was and remains a pivotal event for the nation, one which has not yet been laid to rest. It is no exaggeration to state that the political identity of many a modern-day Hungarian is shaped by the answer to the question: where was your father (or grandfather) in October 1956? Was he on the inside of the barricade fighting the system in the name of democracy, or was he on the outside protecting the dictatorship? This is not just an idle question of history given the fact that today the former economic tiger of Central Europe is governed by individuals who, though elected freely, were all in the past former members of the communist apparatus. Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, who is currently still at the center of a scandal that threatens his political future, was, for example, vice president of the communist youth league before the regime change of 1989/90. The legacy of the revolution is important not for what it tells us, however, about Central Europe today, but for what it tells us about how a nation achieves democracy, or rather, how it can fail to do so.

Observed at a distance from London, Brussels or Washington, the assumption is that Hungary, along with its regional colleagues, is a full graduate of transition, that the (re-)establishment of liberal democracy and market principles is vouched for by its formal inclusion into the European and transatlantic structures of integration, by its successful entry into first NATO (1999) and then the European Union (2004). Yet if this is the case, how do we explain the fact that this former economic powerhouse – which in the 1990s attracted more than 50% of all FDI in Central Europe – now struggles with the greatest regional deficit burden since the Berlin Wall fell and that only a month ago and again this week on the anniversary itself peaceful protestors were involved in violence the likes of which has never before been seen, not since 1956 itself?

The truth is that the transition from dictatorship to democracy is far from complete, or even close to being over. The 1990s saw a flurry of activity in all the countries of the region. In Hungary, for example, as the foreign advisers jetted in and out, the newly elected parliament passed on average 400 new or amended laws per year as part of the process of transition to ‘market economy.’ Regular multiparty elections were held, new judicial, administrative and legislative bodies created, parties founded, and on paper a free market was created and liberal democracy established. But as one commentator has observed with reference to the Middle East, ‘nation-building makes as much sense as orchid-building.’ Both must be grown rather than manufactured. What was little understood, as is only now appreciated in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, is the fact that the adoption of the solely technical aspects of the prevalent western model can at

best create a façade democracy, a state which functions only on the surface, in which the culture and spirit of free markets and political democracy is absent or little understood.

As an eye-witness to the storming of the public television headquarters last month, and the brutal police atrocities of this week, it was made clear to me that the anger of the Hungarian crowds was not focused on parties or government policies, but on a system in which a Prime Minister can be caught having lied to the electorate yet the fact of his lying has no weight. This frustration has only grown with the realization since then that the people have no constitutional tools available to them to facilitate the removal of a head of government who has admitted to lying to win an election and thus lost all public trust, yet who refuses to resign.

Some have tried to present the heart of the matter as the unpopular austerity package the PM has initiated, a package that was not mentioned in the election campaign but sprung on the electorate after the former communists had won. But the real explanation of the crisis is not economic, but moral. As Michael Novak, the theologian, has pointed out, the modern market economy, the modern liberal state cannot function devoid of moral content. The recognition of this fact was the driving force behind the revolution of 1956. As he noted in his seminal *THE SPIRIT OF DEMOCRATIC CAPITALISM*, for our model to work in any national context there have to be: *“three dynamic and converging systems functioning as one: a democratic polity, an economy based on markets and incentives, and a moral-cultural system which is pluralistic and, in the largest sense, liberal.”*

For far too many people on both the left and the right in Hungary and in Central Europe today, democracy and capitalism is about one thing: power and money without consequence. Capitalism is understood as the capitalism of the robber barons, but in this case the barons are not self-made magnates but those best positioned during the fall of Communism in 1990 to privatize state assets into their own pocket, in other words the communist nomenklatura, who like the current Prime Minister, became private sector billionaires overnight. Scandal after scandal that never leads to prosecution or restitution has led to a general fatalism and apathy, as most Hungarians look to the past and conclude that the future is again in the hands on those they cannot influence. The fact that on the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution ordinary citizens were barred by government forces from taking part in the official commemoration that occurred on the square before parliament lest they embarrass the PM, only added insult to injury. When the peaceful gathering tried to make its way to the square it was attacked by riot police using rubber bullets, tear gas and charges of horse-mounted police. Three people have been critically wounded, another 140 are in hospital. Thus it seems the old reflexes of communist dictatorship are hard to overcome even for newly minted “socialists.”

In 1956 there was hope. The revolution may have been crushed, but the hope was kept alive, foremostly by the 250,000 Hungarians that escaped to the West when it became clear that Hungary could not be freed from within. Unfortunately far too few of these people, the majority of whom were active participants in the uprising, returned to their country after the negotiated transition of 1990. As a result Hungary had to make do with a population that

had been taught one thing under the “goulash communism” of dictator János Kádár: it is much better to bend a person’s spine over time than the break it outright. We can but hope that as the crisis in Hungary and the region refuses to die down, the rest of the world will come to realize that the transition is not over and that assistance is needed. In such a fashion we may all learn together just how intricate and slow a journey the road to freedom truly is and that without a moral compass democracy will never flourish, no matter where its seed is planted.

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