

Sebestyén L. v. Gorka
Executive Director
Institute for Transitional Democracy and
International Security, gorka@itdis.org

TO REBUILD A NATION - part 12

There is no democracy without truth

For a long time I did not want to admit it, but now I must. The country I live in is not a democracy. In the past I have not wanted to make this statement because I did not believe it was reasonable to compare Hungary in the 21st century to the Hungary of dictators Rákosi or Kádár. People are not tortured or executed for political reasons in the current Hungary of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's, so how could one compare the two? Well, the truth is that just because our country is no longer a dictatorship does not mean it is a democracy. If we had any doubt, then October the 23rd 2006 has given us the final proof.

I do not care what Budapest Police Commander Gen. Gergényi says. I ignore the statements of the Prime Minister and his SzDSz so-called Liberal Party partners in crime. I was there. I saw things with my own eyes. I saw how on Monday morning only members of the government, foreign guests and security forces were allowed to commemorate the events of 1956 on Kossuth square. I saw how at 9:45, small groups of completely peaceful Hungarians who wished to remember 1956 were forced back down Akadémia street and Nádor street by baton-wielding riot police. Then I saw at 3:15 how those who had come to Alkotmány Boulevard from the Corvin cinema were attacked without provocation by riot police wearing masks and firing teargas grenades. I know this, because I was there.

Then of course there were the events of Erzsébet square and Deák square. No matter what the government says, I saw what happened, and thanks to the brave reporters of HirTV and the Magyar Nemzet we have hard evidence--evidence of police brutality against helpless handcuffed citizens; evidence of rubber bullets being fired illegally at head height into the crowd; evidence of the use of prohibited steel telescoping batons by the police.

Or was it the police? Why were they wearing masks? Now we have reliable reports that the government, realising that it might not have enough officers to keep all people away from the official celebrations and thereby maintaining the illusion of peace for the foreign guests, threatened the biggest security companies in Hungary that if they did not provide guards to

act as extra police officers, they would never receive another government contract. (We know that at Astoria alone there were in excess of 50,000 peaceful Hungarians and that the total number of police in the whole of Hungary is 37,000, therefore their fear of being outnumbered was justified).

Collectively, even the latter story cannot be proven to be true, the gross breach of constitution law and the contravention of the Police Law that can be demonstrated in any case, is only emphasised by the fact that even under the "goulash communism" of János Kádár the state refused to resort to such violence against its own people. As a result, political leaders of such a police force have no right to commemorate a Revolution whose spirit was driven by a love of freedom, democracy and justice.

But what is the answer to our political crisis? Is it the opposition party FIDESZ? It seems not. Again, I was witness to the fact that standing at the corner where Astoria meets Deák square, on my left-hand side I could watch Viktor Orbán give his speech, whilst on my right I could see the clouds of teargas enveloping the demonstrators. Yet Orbán said not one word about the violence occurring within 200 metres of his gathering. Instead he called for yet another petition. I can't even remember how many such petitions FIDESZ has initiated in the last few years. Is this really the answer to a government that uses its police as a political weapon? To collect signatures? Yet again!?

The first real problem we must instead tackle is our constitution. This document is not a constitution worthy of the regime change sixteen years ago but remains in essence the original Stalinist constitution from 1949 with only a few changes made over the years. Limited as it is by the spirit of the Stalinist dictator Matyás Rákosi, the constitution actively undermines today's democracy. To begin with, far too many issues of public concern are limited to the parliamentary threshold of a two-thirds majority. Secondly, the powers of the President of the Republic are very limited by the constitution.

Allegedly the requirement of a two-thirds majority for so many issues was a result of the first free MDF government fearing that the Communists would regain power and reinstate much of the old system through parliamentary procedure. The second decision, to limit the President's powers, resulted from the fear that former apparatchik Imre Pozsgay would win the first presidential election and that he could be exploited by the former Communist MSzP to undermine the first democratically elected government. Both decisions probably seemed rational at the time, but they now act as a brake on the functioning of democracy almost twenty years later. The more important flaw of the two is the limitation of the presidential mandate.

Recently when FIDESZ failed to stand its own presidential candidate to replace Ferenc MádI, and Laszlo Solyom was the non-party Védogylet Association's surprise winner, people were divided over the outcome. Since Solyom was not the government's candidate, he was deemed by many to be a force of

opposition to the former Communists. But then there were the voices that pointed to his marriage to the daughter of a leading Communist Party member and the track record of the Constitutional Court when he was its president, to prove that he was more liberal than conservative.

I think neither is true. I believe Solyom is the kind of person who tries to please both sides of the political spectrum. That is the only way one can explain the fact that the same man who made the speech on October 1st after the local elections that clearly laid the responsibility for the current crisis at the feet of Gyurcsány also made a speech last week in Strasbourg to the European Parliament stating that the commemorations of 1956 were dignified. Incredibly the President had nothing to say about the fact that normal Hungarians were not allowed to lay wreathes at the memorial to the martyrs of 1956 on Kossuth Square and that the police used force for the first time since 1956 on the very anniversary of the revolution.

But Solyom's political flip-flops are not the point. The deeper trouble is that even if he could have maintained a consistent stance in opposition to a Prime Minister who had lied to win an election, he is powerless to do anything about it. In a democracy there must be independent sanctioning tools available within the political system that can be used in the event that an elected government significantly loses the public trust or is found to be otherwise unfit to govern. Hungary has no such option.

For reasons discussed above, those with the responsibility for framing a new democratic political system for Hungary in 1989 failed to provide the checks and balances which are so necessary for the functioning of democracy. Democracy requires not only a set of rights, but also a credible commitment among its leaders to those rights. That commitment can be established in two ways. The first is through a precedent of responsible behaviour in which the leaders demonstrate their commitment to a set of rules that they will consistently enforce. But we have learned, over time, that that is highly unreliable. So most democracies have developed a second mechanism: a set of rules and a means of enforcing them that prevents violation of the commitment. The single most critical mechanism is the separation of power—a number of ways in which power is dispersed and prevented from being concentrated in one set of hands. Hungary does not have a separation of powers. All power rests with the governing party, or governing coalition. They hold the Parliament, they provide the Prime Minister, and the weak presidency can do little more than comment on what he sees, as Solyom has done. To fully restore democracy in Hungary, therefore, will require a full and proper rewriting of the Hungarian Constitution.

There is an even greater problem, though. As this series of articles has attempted to demonstrate over the last few months, there are certain fixed truths about this model we call democracy and the system we call the free-market. Regarding the latter economic truths, the most important one is that free-markets only function when they are based upon the principle that

“small government” is good and that the greater the individual’s liberty the better functioning the market will be. What we have in Hungary today is not a free market. In fact the size of the government has in an absurd fashion grown since Communism fell and the individual freedom of the average Hungarian has diminished over the years. Most Hungarians do not recognize the critical relationship between freedom and taxation—the more a government taxes an individual and makes economic decisions on his or her behalf, the less that individual is deciding his economic future. In essential aspects of life, such as healthcare and education, Hungarians have no choice. It is all decided for them, and much to their loss.

The new Gyurcsány package is only making matters worse, not because reform is not necessary but because the package is based upon raising taxes, which will further dampen the economy, without sufficiently cutting back the size and role of the government. The current plan does nothing to restore individual liberty.

However, FIDESZ does not believe in the free-market either. Its new call for a referendum makes this clear. FIDESZ may say it wishes to lower taxes, and this is a wise move, but in the same breath its leaders say that the medical sector and education should not be radically reformed. This is absurd. Hungary simply cannot maintain current levels of state support for education and health, especially if tax revenue is decreased. We need government to get out of the economy as much as possible. Where it must retain a presence that presence must be small and performance based. What does it mean for example that in the Hungarian state university system one simply cannot fire a professor before his retirement age, no matter how good or bad he is? Is this a recipe for an efficient and modern Hungary?

But the economy cannot function, whether the government is big or small, if we continue to ignore another fundamental truth of democracy. Democracy must be based upon trust. Trust cannot be earned without truth. In a country where the victim of police brutality refuses to make a complaint to the courts because he or she may lose their job, there is no trust and truth cannot be had. But why do we not have truth? Very simply, because Hungarians lived a lie for so many decades and the lie has not been recognised in all its reality. Hungarians were prisoners to a system that was built on government lies. Lies about 1956, lies about the Hungarian economy, lies about the West, lies about the USSR and lies about the workers paradise that was Communism.

Now I will say something that most 5 year old children know is true, but which is not in fact true in today’s Hungary: lying is wrong. Yes I know that all politicians lie, but they cannot lie all the time and about everything. In a real democracy there are limits to lying, and if you are caught you pay the price. Just look to the examples of history: Profumo, Nixon, Cresson, Olesky. One could make a long list of ministers, commissioners and even presidents that lied about something important and paid the price. That is democracy: accountability to the people for what you say.

But why is there no accountability in our country, from the Postabank scandal to the K&H Bank fraud, from Gyurcsány's outrageous Balatonöszöd speech to the Strabag payoffs to the SzDSz and beyond? For a very simple reason. There was no accountability for the crimes and lies of the past. Who has been held accountable for the lies that the system manufactured 24 hours a day from 1948 to 1989? Who paid the price for imprisoning, torturing and killing their fellow Hungarians in the name of an alien ideology? Except for some old pathetic borderguards prosecuted for their actions in 1956, no one. And more importantly not one member of the Communist Party elite.

Now I am no naïve dreamer. Although my own father was tortured and imprisoned by the Communist regime for politically resisting Rákosi's takeover, I know that many of the worst criminals have died and that we cannot easily bring the surviving members of the former elite to court. Yet I am convinced that as long as we do not uncover the lies and identify the people who kept the system alive, we will never have a democracy. But perhaps even more important than demonstrating the awful truth about those forty years of our very recent history, is the act of apology. If members of the former regime and their political descendants cannot recognise the truths of the past and ask forgiveness from their victims, Hungary will always be divided and any future socialist government will be as scared of its own people as Ferenc Gyurcsány is scared of his fellow countrymen as he hides behind the police cordons of power. How can it be that since 1989 the only politician to have apologised for the violence of 1956, for example, was Boris Yeltsin, and he's not even Hungarian.

The lesson therefore of October 23rd 2006 is that like some other former dictatorships we too need a Truth Commission. The House of Terror museum was just the start, but we now need a national, apolitical organisation that will finally allow trust, truth and democracy to grow and just as importantly, ensure that never again will Hungarians hurt other innocent Hungarians for the sake of political power.