Centre for Fair Political Analysis published its essay *Anatomy of the Right – Why is Fidesz the way it is and could it be different?* for a Hungarian audience. Nevertheless we feel it may be a useful resource for our foreign followers as well. Some additional explanations are necessary though to better understand the text as well as our motivation for writing it.

Three fundamental remarks on our study:

1. Concerning the title; we must make it clear right at the beginning that this essay focuses solely on Fidesz and the reasons that led to its actions in the past three years. The essay does not aim to evaluate or judge these actions, or to take into account their success. We have focused on the rate of realization of the government program in other analyses. This time we wanted to uncover the deeper reasons behind Fidesz policies and the evolution of the party’s approach to politics over time. What brought about its current mentality? What drives them to take head on all the foreign conflicts the government and the country have to endure? What is their vision? We feel that beyond the easy explanation of an “authoritarian narrative” lies a conscious theoretical “backbone” that has evaded mapping so far.

2. Why equate Fidesz with the Hungarian right? Because it is the single dominant party in the classical right wing hemisphere of Hungarian politics. In this case we have to make a clear distinction between the right and extreme right. While Fidesz is radical in its actions nevertheless Jobbik does not belong in the same category as Fidesz and all other formerly relevant conservative/right wing parties, such as MDF, have lost significance.

3. Last but not least, expect the unexpected from this study. Centre for Fair Political Analysis is a non-party funded independent think tank. Unbound by political loyalties we feel that from time to time it is important to go beyond everyday political analysis and write theoretical pieces as well. Regardless of political sympathy, we cannot understand Hungarian politics without the study of a party that has been an important actor in it for over twenty years now. We hope our essay contributes to a better understanding of Fidesz actions both at home and abroad.
Why is Fidesz the way it is, and could it be different?

Following the 25th anniversary of the founding of Fidesz, Centre for Fair Political Analysis* felt it was high time to evaluate the past three years of governance. The aim of the essay is to map and understand the characteristics of the Hungarian right; their motivations as well as the ideology behind their actions. We avoid repeating the usual criticism against Fidesz, which does not mean we do not have critical remarks. We feel that these critiques neither help to understand the underlying “secret”, nor do they reach the essence of the problems.

We feel that through the analysis of this question we can get closer to understanding Hungary’s deeper problems (above and beyond Fidesz). Therefore the writing focuses on how much the current state of the right is due to “structural” causes, such as the individual structure of Hungarian society, as well as the traditions that formed it. We aim to give a set of criteria and a framework for understanding, in order to generate a new debate on the right (and of course on Hungary as well).

The essay consists of four parts. The first describes the standpoint from which CFPA wrote the analysis. The second presents the most important ideological cornerstones of Fidesz’s political strategy and governance. In the third part we confront these cornerstones one by one with the independent – primarily Western European – receptions. Finally, in the fourth part we evaluate the achievements of the Hungarian right based on the aspect of democratic theory and a historical approach.

I. Is it possible to write an analysis of Fidesz?

In face of the strong anti-government emotions the question must be posed: is there place for political analysis aiming to “dissect” the intentions and motivations of the government and the right? The “facts” speak for themselves: a party – but primarily its leader – has gone “crazy” therefore the community of “normal” people have to bring them to order. In such a situation any analysis about the “what’s and why’s” of Fidesz’s (and the government’s) actions might seem as a pro-government apology.

Beyond the autocratic narrative

We must make it clear that for us Fidesz is not an object of our sympathy but the primary source to understanding Hungary’s problems. Naturally the interpretation according to which Fidesz-rule is primarily autocratic is legitimate however in our view false. This narrative does not explain adequately the Fidesz phenomenon or the important question of if this narrative were true how is it possible that Hungary became autocratic? If Hungary is a stable democracy, how can this stability suddenly come to an end from one day to the other replaced by despotism? In such a country there had to be already a problem with the system of checks and balances, the opposition and society itself which allowed this to happen. Furthermore if this could happen then the nature of the East-West relations were quite poor as the West did not have enough power to avert such a change. The autocratic narrative raises too many questions and explains too few, this is why we search for an alternative interpretation.

Our approach to understanding the Hungarian right is that there is a reason behind the “radical” approach which can be clearly defined. Fidesz’s 2/3’s majority could not have come about without the political and economic stagnation which characterized Hungary from about 2005. This stagnation was observed much earlier by economist Lajos Bokros as well, who first wrote about the need for the “critical mass of reforms”. What is this if not a way out of stagnation? Bokros and Fidesz, however strange a pair they make, while very different in their ideology, are both right in this case. The only way a transformation can be successful in Hungary is if the changes reach a certain limit – a point of no return – from which the internal forces can not reverse reforms. This is at the center of Fidesz’s government policy from 2010. While we do not say that Fidesz’s changes are in any way connected to Bokros’s, however the starting point in both cases is that the structures behind stagnation have to be radically dismantled. The Hungarian right has committed itself to radically changing everything.

Road to constitutional crisis

The style of governance from 2010 that prefers radical change created a constitutional crisis. This situation is not without antecedents, there have been several such cases in our history. Currently we are faced with the inverse of the constitutional crisis that broke out in the summer of 2006, following the leaking of the Őszöd speech. The content of the speech was just one cause for the crisis. The second is much less frequently mentioned: Ferenc Gyurcsány was the first Hungarian prime minister since the change of regime who proposed a program of basically complete structural renewal. In the shadow of Őszöd its completion was impossible. At that time, the right complained of a constitutional crisis and of illegitimate governance. The constitutional crises became complete not so long ago when the new constitution written by Fidesz came into effect. Since 2011 all fault lines that have existed since the change of regime (e.g. left-right or liberal-conservative) have transformed, giving way to the “historical” fault line of the “constitution protecting” opposition and the “pro-constitutional change” government. This is a deeply rooted fault line missing from the history of the luckier Western European countries, however not at all unknown to Hungarians.

If the political competition is not between liberals, conservatives etc. but between “the protectors of the constitution” and those that “destroy it” then the party competition that normal liberal democracies are used to becomes impossible. If the opposition holds not

* The essay appeared as the supplement of Irodalom on May 17, 2013. The authors are: Ervin Cziurmadia, Péter Cséry, Andria Jenei, Júlia Lakatos, Attila Tibor Nagy, Zoltán Novák, Ádám Paár
just certain actions of the government to be incompetent but the complete existence of it to be unconstitutional (going against even the constitution it had created) then the possibility of even a minimal interaction or cooperation comes to an end and the government claim which had placed the creation of “national unity” at the top of its priorities in 2010 will be in vain.

II. The paradigm of radical change

The intellectual self-representation of Fidesz

The ideological groundings of a party can be pieced together from 1) party manifestos; 2) speeches, interviews given by members of the party; 3) from the works of connected think tanks and intellectuals. Whichever category we look at, Fidesz has not been active recently. Whereas following the 2006 Őszöd speech it was active in all three fields2. After coming to power in 2010 the diverse activities that characterized it in opposition came to an end. Anyone trying to find a written ideological, theoretical core behind the past three years of governance will have a hard time.

Ever since its ascent to power the government has paid less than enough attention to formulating their ideas on governance and the transformation of the country. It presented the System of National Cooperation (Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere) furthermore it created its Constitution, however aside from this neither the government, nor the right-wing think tanks or ideologists wrote texts that interpreted what was happening for the wider public (not to mention foreigners). This does not mean that the leaders of Fidesz and the intellectuals close to the party are not active verbally. It is apparent however to what extent members of the government avoid the topic of interpreting the government’s intentions for radical change concentrating instead on another topic; that of Hungary being misunderstood by foreigners and the opposition. Even Fidesz can not think that the foreign and domestic critiques stem purely from “misunderstandings” or “animosity” towards the government. Our external surroundings (whatever we may think of them) are given; the prominent members of Fidesz should come to terms with the fact that it is exactly because of the Hungarian right’s radical country transforming actions (and the philosophy behind it) that the international and domestic critiques multiplied. It is interesting that the right does not try to give a more detailed answer to these critiques – whereas it has a rather complex message.

Radicalism: concept and examples

If we say that Fidesz is the proponent of radical change we must define what radicalism means in this context. Fidesz is not radical the way Jobbik is (and not an extreme right party). However in its basic attitude it is radical and this is in the radical transformation of the status quo even at the expense of changing the existing legal frameworks. Governments rarely ever attempt to take such a stance as changing everything means violating interests risking their popularity amongst a varied circle of actors that influence politics.

However this is just the sphere of the “elite” and the level of citizens or voters is equally important. Radical governance changes the everyday lives of voters as well. While voters prefer stability we have to call attention to two things: 1) Despite the amount of changes Fidesz’s relative support has not dropped drastically; 2) It is not at all certain that stability is a trademark of governments that avoid greater transformations. Aside from the economic crisis, it is exactly stagnation that unseated the former liberal-left government. Nevertheless the 2014 elections will decide to what extent the voters “reward” the current grandiose changes.

FROM STAGNATION TO CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

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2 See Viktor Orbán’s series of articles: Vízválasztó, I., II., III., Magyar Nemzet, 2006 July 29, August 5 and September 9. Between 2006 and 2010 Fidesz accepted several new programs, documents and proclamations for example: Erős Magyarország – Epic európai program, December 2007. The common element of these is the constant voicing of the moral principles of politics.
Looking at historical examples of this type of transformative politics, we have to mention two historical periods. One is the 1930’s the other is the Hungarian Reform Era. The opponents of Fidesz basically only speak of the first and relate the current events with the horrible transformation of the country of the time. We understand this historical analogy, and we have to admit that there are several similarities concerning the “politics of independence” economic heterodoxy as well as the anti-bank and elite policy. However we do not hold this parallel to be fully explanatory. The claim for radical transformation is much older, coming from the Reform Era, even though it was only realized in the 1930’s. The notion that Hungary is in need of radical reparation, in other words of the elimination of stagnation appears for the first time in this era.

By mentioning these historical precedents we would like to emphasize that the intention to radically change the country is not a curiosity, however it is also a fact that the claim for radical transformation as an imperative above everything else only appeared in the second term of Fidesz following 2010. As in the Reform Era the aim was to dismantle completely the dysfunctional feudal structure, Fidesz would like to surpass post-communism which according to them still lives on. This is not a new element in Fidesz’s policy. They have been voicing it since 1996. The new element is a technical one, that of the 2/3’s majority.

The problems connected to the Hungarian right stem not so much from their ideas but from the extent of their power. A government majority that surpasses 2/3’s is a huge temptation to fulfill the long-existing wish for change however it is also a huge challenge. Parties and the governments they create are confronted with never before seen emotions and alliances forming against them. The fact that the current government has gotten into serious conflict with practically the whole of Europe (and most of North America as well) can be explained by none other than the institutional triumph of the policy of radical change.

The seven ideological cornerstones

We can see that there are complex ideas behind the actions that define the Hungarian right’s policies it is not at all improvisation. From hereon we will concentrate on the fundamental elements of this coherent theory.

1. Hungary in the world: a new sort of interpretation of the West

We cannot understand Fidesz’s actions and their reasons if at first we do not point out the fact that at the center of the party’s whole approach lays the aim of completing a mission which is to turn around trends that go back centuries. This intention is based on two fundamentals: 1) the external surroundings of Hungary have to be analyzed and understood much more extensively in Hungarian politics, starting with the developed Western countries so that the country does not continuously look for the reasons of its internal failures in the alignment of the stars and unfavorable external conditions; 2) At the same time, the country should not get stuck in the Hungarian political elites “follo$$w” mentality concerning the West but it should become active with own initiatives. It doesn’t come as a surprise for us (as Centre for Fair Political Analysis has been talking about this for a long time) that these ideas are formulated the most clearly by the current President of the Central Bank, former Minister of Finance György Matolsy (still as a civilian) in the preface to his 2004 book American Empire. We are not implying that he is the official ideologist of the Hungarian right nevertheless it is worth noticing how recognizable these two aspects are in governing, especially the second one. According to Matolsy, “in the past centuries the Hungarian political elite knew relatively little about the surroundings which eventually determined its fate. Not only did it know too little, it also misled itself: in decisive historical moments its compass was not reality but the illusions constructed from its own ignorance.” He goes on to say: “If Hungarian interests that opposed those of the United States led us astray in 2002 then first of all we have to understand America. If aside from the United States the interests of other European powers were in conflict with the Hungarian political aspirations before 2002 then these could have played a role in the outcome of the 2002 elections as well.” At the same time – as we have already referred to this – in the programs of Fidesz, starting from 1996, this “harmonious cooperation” always meant a critical European policy, never submission. Fidesz is the only party in Hungarian politics that – starting from the mid 90s – had advocated the renewal of the West as well and can only imagine Hungary’s improving Western relations with a changing Western Europe.

2) The final rollback of post-communism: unorthodox public policy

Another key element of the Orbán government’s nation transforming politics is the aspiration for a new interpretation of public law. One of the elements that determine the current transformation of Hungary is the postulate that the events between 1944 and 1990 are qualified as illegitimate, as they did not take place within the frameworks of a sovereign country. Fidesz does not recognize the happenings that resulted from the power structures that arose as a result of the German and Soviet occupations as legitimate from which only one conclusion can be drawn, that in an “unorthodox” era of “recommencement” these heritages have to be eliminated radically, above all the constitutional structure which qualifies as the legacy of “post-communism”. It follows logically from this consideration that the modified constitution of 1989 (regardless of whether it is called Stalinist or something else) is not fit to be the constitution of a country in need of renewal therefore a completely new one has to be created. If we continue along this line of logic however, then the new constitution has to connect to the period before 1944 and ultimately to the old unwritten constitution. Therefore a peculiar situation arises, namely that the newly created constitution is directly connected to the “spirit” of the unwritten constitution. Before we go ahead and call this standpoint absurd we have to point out that this solution is not completely unique in Europe: the Baltic countries made a similar break in public law when they separated from the Soviet Union and created their own nation-states.

3. Maximizing governance: striving to govern for several terms

Great changes characterize the position of the right within the whole of the party system as well. This process didn’t start in 2010 either, but not even in 1998 with Fidesz’s first time in power, but in 1994 when Fidesz (with the consciousness that characterizes it) started to construct the right-wing pole of Hungarian party politics that had practically disappeared with MDF. The process was completed later on as basically no significant party

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5 This first appeared in Fidesz’s 1998 A Polgári Magyarországéért program.
remained on this side other than Fidesz. The fact that following 2010 we can not only talk about the birth of a mammoth party but also about the return of the dominant party type of Hungarian history (which the liberal-left – mistakenly – identifies with converting to a one-party system, whereas in a one-party system there is no possibility for alternative parties to organize) is connected to this success. On the contrary, in a dominant party system there is a highly virulent opposition, even if – and this is why the system is dominant – they are not able to govern. The measure of Fidesz’s success is that by now it is capable of simultaneously showing two things for itself: 1) itself as basically the only party able to govern; 2) a fragmented opposition (as the supplementary element of a dominant party system). The possibility of changing to a dominant party system (in other words that one party alliance governs for several terms) in the new democracies of Central Eastern Europe which are based on (at best) four year cycles is a radical innovation in itself. In Hungary, between 1990 and 2006 there were always one-term governments. Though it is true that the liberal-left broke this pattern for the first time, however the chances of them being able to govern extensively seem to have evaporated in 2010 for a long period of time. If Fidesz wins in 2014 the elite compromise of the change of regime that institutionalized frequent (though never premature) changes in government for the sake of stability will ultimately end.

4. Hard government: the elimination of the multi-actor model

Fidesz’s notion of governing goes completely against the “celebrated” European trend according to which: 1) global governance is taking place in today’s world in which the national interests are rather subordinated; 2) a high number of economic, social, financial and lobby actors participate in governing who have a defining role in decision making as well. This concept of governing is called governance or multi-actor governing and basically this was what the liberal-left governments represented between 2002 and 2010. The Hungarian right broke sharply with this notion when from the beginning of its term it made governing a one-man act, taking away decision-making powers and placing them exclusively in the hand of the government. This is not authoritarianism but a concept which the international literature calls a government or singular approach. It is by far not Orbán’s invention, though it is true that the monopolization of decision making (let’s call this hard government)⁶ is quite unusual compared to the former models of government and creates serious conflicts of interest with the social and business partners that had been taken into consideration before. However, to give a picture of how conscious these steps are, the idea of strong governance was first formulated by the right in opposition in 2007.⁷ We have pointed out the origin of this concept several times in the Norwegian political scientist Stein Ringen’s radical critique of multi-actor government’s,⁸ which appeared significantly in the actions of Fidesz during the past three years.

5. Economic policy: breaking with mainstream devices

By elevating György Matolcsy into a decisive leading economic position in 2010, a radically new line of economic policy emerged compared to that of the earlier liberal-left government. Naturally all this happened deliberately with the intention of transforming the whole economic policy. However before we jump to the conclusion that this is just György Matolcsy “running amuck” let’s go back in time a little and read the study which (uniquely in the Hungarian market of political analyses) tried to grasp the main point of Fidesz’s economic philosophy, as well as the radical differences compared to the ideas of their rivals in 1997 when they were aspiring to rule for the first time. Political scientist Péter Csigo described Fidesz’s economic philosophy with the term microeconomic-fixation in face of the liberal-left’s macroeconomic-fixation.⁹ Sixteen years later we cannot say that the antecedents were not known, though it is a fact that at the second half of the 90’s the term heterodoxy was unknown. Once again we have to say that when analyzing Fidesz’s activity it is fitting that we name the fundamentals of their economic policy, which by the way are far from unknown internationally. It is true that this economic policy is not yet successful however in this essay we are not speaking of whether or not Fidesz’s nation transforming activity is successful but about what the basis of their actions are. And the base is this all-around transformation to which the economic policy makers “logically” add the idea for boosting the micro world and neglecting the macro sphere.
Moving on, it is clear that the Hungarian government has more knowledge about the permanent debate between the Western schools of economic policy and wants to take a stand in this dispute. György Matolcsy’s book review series in Heti Válasz was written based upon the otherwise correct stance to at least inform the Hungarian readers of the existence of this debate. At the same time he practically only selected works from representatives of the heterodox school who permanently criticized the mainstream or neoliberal teachings. Naturally this does not mean that on the international level the balance has tipped in favor of heterodoxy in the orthodox-heterodox debate; the bastions of mainstream economy are very solid both domestically and abroad. Matolcsy (and the Hungarian government) obviously want to deliberately “rock” these positions. As a recent example we can mention one of György Matolcsy’s first actions as President of the National Bank which reduced the credit interest rates for small and medium enterprises completely verifying what we have said earlier about the micro-fixation.

One of the most criticized elements of the right-wing nation transforming radicalism is that in Fidesz’s policy the emphasis was transferred from the elite to society, the nation, the people, that is, Fidesz is a populist party. Fidesz’s approach towards society is grounded in the experience that not only did the change of regime based upon elite compromise not increase Hungary’s efficacy and competitiveness, it actually decreased it. According to this approach freeing the capacities of society is perhaps the best guarantee for the increase of output. Fidesz started the transformation of the different systems in the past three years exactly in order to free up these energies – and once again we just state this here without dealing with the assessment of the situation that comes about as a result of the transformation.

We have to mention here as well that this is exactly why Fidesz is not sensitive to the liberal demand of upholding the rule of law because at the center of its approach is a uniquely interpreted notion of achievement, the increase of which it does not see guaranteed in the liberal institutions created by the elites of the change of regime. The elite – according to this approach – was not able to place Hungary on a new track during a time span of two decades. Ultimately this is the reason why the right turned against the achievements in the area of rule of law that had been dominated by the liberal-left. Viktor Orbán formulated in several of his speeches just what the difference is between the approach to freedom and society of the liberal-left and the right is, emphasizing all along that the left wants to change society while on the contrary the right accepts it for what it is.11 At the same time the right

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10 The Hungarian public knows very little about heterodox economics and its role in international economic debates therefore it often seems as if it were György Matolcsy’s invention. From the huge literature see: Ali Douai-Andrew Meinman-Joana Negru Prospects for a heterodox economics of the environment and sustainability. Cambridge Journal of Economics, 2012. 36. 1029-1032.

11 Orbán spoke frequently about these topics for example in Tüskeföldi. Ervin Czirmai analyzed the content of the speeches between 2007-2011 on
– while it wants to protect society from the transformative effects of the opposition – touches the current structure of society quite seriously as well, outlining preferences, aims, ideals and ultimately trying to create a new sort of social integration. In theory this intention could even be productive as not one government could manage to contribute to the strengthening of social integration and cohesion in the past almost a quarter of a century. We say that “in theory” because the furthering of social cohesion with government methods is familiar in the daily practices of Western European democracies. However, while in Western Europe these government aspirations can build on evolutionary processes that have come about over long periods of time, the essence of Fidesz’s governing is to quickly and effectively break the public opinion influencing power of the “status quo elite” and the social groups “connected” to it (Milla, HaHa etc.).

7. The role of “personality”: the political leader as an institution replacing authority

Last but not least, according to mentality of the Hungarian right the political leader has an emphasized significance; he is the final source of authority. Once again, many people see this as the outlet of authoritarianism whereas in fact the tradition of leadership authority comes much more from Christianity. Therefore in Fidesz’s perception, the political leader is not like what the other side wants to believe (e.g. dictator) but much more someone who people see as a person who is capable of taking action and dislodging the country from stagnation. It is not an accident that Viktor Orbán’s idols are Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle or Margaret Thatcher. They were politicians who in their time were “great transformers” and steadfast “warriors” who while they divided society also reached a high level of authority amongst their supporters and even internationally.

According to the interpretation of the right, the “good leader” is pre-eminent not in precisely keeping to the criteria of the rule of law but in improving the comparative state of the country, the way the great predecessors did. It is important to mention however that for the right pragmatism is also a criterion of the “good leader”. If his actions are not successful in the West he will quickly switch and look for other (e.g. Eastern) international forms of cooperation. It is not an accident that no matter how much criticism Orbán receives internationally and domestically from the Hungarian opposition, at the moment this doesn’t mean a thing concerning his authority; he is the same unquestionable authority as he was while in opposition. With this, the figure of the “authoritarian” leader is a constant and huge challenge in itself for mainstream Hungarian politics in which there is not much place for politicians with exceptional qualities. Nowadays we can hardly find highly talented and popular politicians in Western Europe or Hungary. However strange it may seem, from this point of view Orbán is an exception and one of the primary sources of the uncompetitiveness of the opposition is that they cannot produce a leader of similar caliber and authority.

III. Critical perceptions: Western Europe and the Hungarian right

Even the most “nationalistic” government’s can not disregard what their surroundings think of them. However popular a policy might be at home their governance depends on the approval of the international community as well. Every government has to come to terms with the fact that in a global world the aspects of evaluation go beyond borders as well. Global credit rating agencies are just as good examples of this as the institutes that examine in a comparative way the state of democracies, freedom of the press, the constitutional system and many other aspects of life as well. These assessments, rankings, influence international opinion. Not to mention that the framework of Hungary’s European presence, the European Union is perhaps itself the most important source of evaluation.

We feel that instead of protecting the country from these, governance should be harmonized with them. This aspect would be far from strange to the right, on the contrary; it would fit right in the “Matolcsy-project”. It is exactly Matolcsy who wrote that the primary reason for the historical underachievement of the Hungarian elite is the misunderstanding of the West. What if Fidesz is making exactly the mistake that Matolcsy warned not to do?

Nevertheless, we have to establish that the government has trouble accepting the external situation as well as these systems of evaluation moreover it builds on the exact same “protective” reflexes with which their predecessors “defended” the nation in face of external – at times but not always, imperial – “attacks”. It is clear that Hungary can not win in this conflict. However it is erroneous to interpret the Hungarian government’s “sovereignty protecting” approach as the construction of an authoritarian rule. As we have mentioned above, the policy of radical change is different in nature from authoritarianism. Nevertheless we also have to acknowledge that the West can only react to it in line with their historical traditions, values and ideology.

The Hungarian right’s foreign policy as seen by the West

Fidesz has an alternative approach to the West which is completely different from the liberal-left interpretation. As we have seen, this interpretation has an “intellectual” core: several times during the course of its history Hungarian intellectuals have attributed the trauma that befell the country to the West and misinterpreted its role. This could be – or rather could have been – a good starting point for Fidesz because it includes (as we have quoted György Matolcsy) the need for the revision of this historical bias as well as the acknowledgment of their own responsibility. Matolcsy’s book, the American Empire is full of praise for America at times even at the expense of the European commitment.

This U.S-Western Europe-Europe differentiation has been present quite strongly in Fidesz’s documents from the middle of the 90’s. We could say that in the past fifteen years the Hungarian right has been completely consistent in its critique concerning the European political arena and the European institutions; in this case it is basically receiving strong contra-critique from Western Europe. It is surprising however how little it could improve its relation with the United States. Is it warranted that the whole of the West turned against the Hungarian right? What is the explanation for this?

In our opinion the main explanation of their failure lies in Fidesz’s radical foreign policy, meaning that the Hungarian right wants to “correct” Hungary’s relation to the West which in their view is symmetric. According to Fidesz asymmetric is not precise enough, hierarchic is much more fitting, therefore it would like to solve this by trying to make Hungary “equal”. Naturally, for several reasons, this approach goes against the West’s (European Union and the United States) idea of the region and of Hungary’s role within. Viktor Orbán’s government would like a Hungary ascending from a several century long role of subordination. According to Western perception however, Hungary’s status is completely different and from this approach the radical manner of the Hungarian government aimed at
changing Hungary’s status is completely uncalled for.

The government’s “revolutionary” rhetoric – used from time to time – originates from this conflict. This rhetoric results in Hungary seeming to be even more the most problematic country in the region whose Atlantic commitment can be questioned. Here we are faced with a serious source of conflict which is unquestionably provoked by the full-blooded approach of the Hungarian right to changing the East-West status quo. As we have said before: not only did the government fail to improve the American-Hungarian relations (which György Matolcsy called attention to in 2004) it further deteriorated.

The cast-off “revolutionary” public policy

The current government’s policy on public law goes against the West’s opinion about the continuity of the Hungarian system of public law in several ways. This opposition of the West concerns the acceptance of the new constitution and the annulment of the old constitution but by now it extends also to certain amendments as well as to the critique of provisions placed within the constitution.

Fidesz’s argument concerning constitutional “discontinuity” is not really interesting for the external community. It is worth consideration though that between 1944 and 1990 we can not speak of right-wing politics in Hungary and though following the change of regime right-wing parties could come about, as a result of the decades of interruption, the conservative-Christian democratic political culture that could be handed down in Western Europe was simply didn’t exist. This is a great disadvantage for the right to this day. The Hungarian right’s “offer” is to make up the left out right-wing culture of Western Europe radically fast, in other words to complete the path that several Western European countries had covered following World War II, creating the social market economy and the welfare state in the process.

However this approach built on discontinuity clashes harshly with Western Europe’s experiences of the transitions and democratizations that took place at the end of the socialist era. Let’s just think over what an extensive system of relations Western powers kept up with for example the Hungarian democratic opposition at that time, not in order to persuade them to start a “traditional” revolution, but in order to find a potent actor to carry out a peaceful change of regime. Even if not through a revolution in the streets the West still stimulated a revolutionary change; this is what we call a constitutional change of regime. The constitutional revolution, focused on the rule of law, replaced dictatorship with democracy. With this the revolution was over as far as the West was concerned. It is not an accident that in the middle of the 1990’s Western Europe was already talking about the consolidation of the new democracies, meaning under this that in their eyes the new democracies were equivalent institutionally to the liberal democracies of the West which had evolved over long periods of time.

The first time this interpretation was challenged was at the time of Fidesz’s 1998 election victory (where it was pronounced that what is needed is “more than a change of government but less than a change of regime”); the second challenge was the 2010 Fidesz 2/3’s majority win, while the third was the acceptance of the new constitution. Fidesz’s “recommencement” goes against the West’s perception of the change of regime as a unique, unrepeatable moment in history. Fidesz should recognize this if it would like a rich and varied relation with the West, if it would like to understand it. It should see for example that the West has also changed a lot during the past decade. For example it took steps in order for it to be not just an economic but a political community of values too. Values are very important for the Hungarian right as well, nevertheless when forming its new public policy and constitution it paid little attention to make clear for the changing EU (which now expects and refers the similarity of values) and the West that its right-about turn concerning public policy does not mean the rehabilitation of the 30’s. This ill judgment cost dearly for the Hungarian right, amongst other reasons, because today the sanctity of the constitutional system is a basic norm for EU member states (this was not always so).

The theory of the interweavement of the right and the extreme right

As we have shown, a commotion arose in the Hungarian party system in 2006 and by 2010 Fidesz reached a massively dominant position which it has retained to this day. Minor and major changes happen in Western party systems as well, but nothing triggers such strong criticism as the appearance and functioning of radical and extreme parties. Naturally Western Europe has a several decade head start in this question (as well): radical parties appeared there in three waves in the period since 1945. First in the 50’s, however these weren’t really successful in the heyday of the welfare states. The second time in the 70’s when the consensus on welfare was exhausted and the Western European countries showed signs of crises. This is when the French National Front, the Austrian Freedom Party as well as the Northern (Norwegian and Danish) radical parties strengthened. The third time was in the early 2000’s when with the augmentation of the problem of immigration radical parties turned against the newcomers, abandoning at the same time their former anti-democracy, anti-system attitudes. The essence of the Western European process is that there the parties appearing in different waves are integrated into the system, hence meaning far less of a threat than before. However Fidesz is feared abroad. They are afraid that with the “dismantling” of the multiparty system Fidesz wants to return to the “one party system”. We have already shown that this is mistaken as a dominant party system does not mean a one party system. However we have to refer here as well to the fact that with the change of regime the West received a Central Europe that could be easily “managed” in which
multipartite parliaments existed with parties that were taking turns to govern. However the “central force field” announced by Orbán brings to mind the return to a governing party that can not be dismissed and Fidesz should take this into account.

Fidesz has an even greater challenge however, and that is that the West does not really see any difference between Fidesz and the Hungarian far right. Though István Bibó warned in his works not to confuse the right with the far right his “admonitions” didn’t survive the period of the change of regime of which Bibó was an iconic figure of. The reason the opinions about Orbanism and the Hungarian right are so negative is because Western Europe attributes the distortion of Hungarian democracy that led to the strengthening of the far right to Fidesz. Naturally the political analyses of the symptoms are one thing (the demand for radical parties evolve in every country struggling with crisis); and the interpretation of the reasons are another. We can say with quite certainty that the intention aimed at not distinguishing the two poles are connected to Fidesz’s radical nation transforming attitude, which in itself is capable of drawing critiques from all sides. Either way, the Hungarian right should be more aware of the fact that Jobbik’s actions fall back on Fidesz mainly because of the racism and anti-Semitism attributed to the extreme right party.

The Western critique of the one man government

Moving on we can also diagnose that it is a further source of antipathy that the Hungarian right completely neglects those philosophical basics of government that have evolved in Western Europe in the past decades. There are two such fundamental schools which the Hungarian right disregards in the name of Hungarian interests. One is the theme of governance which we have already mentioned; the other is new public management. A huge amount of literature has accumulated on both topics and Fidesz does not apply the conclusions of either one to its governing. The most important cause of problems in this case is that by restricting the scope of actors participating in political decisions the Hungarian right is contradicting the belief of Western Europe that not just the formal agents influence decision making but a whole lot of other groups besides them called non governmental actors. Despite this the Hungarian right has been unable to comprehend for the past three years why its policies are judged “politically” instead of “professionally”. It seems that in this case the Orbán government and the right have lost their sense of reality. It was exactly the right who – for example in 2009 – advocated for political governing in face of the Bajnai government’s government of experts. Let’s face it: it is right in this; in a democracy professional aspects can overrule political ones only in very exceptional cases.

If this is so then why is the Hungarian government so surprised that many people want to judge its work and mainly not upon professional aspects? During the past decades the Western public has grown used to having the right to voice their opinion on politics even as laymen therefore it does so in the case of every EU member state. Viktor Orbán’s argument concerning “angry left-wing politicians” is based on a misunderstanding. This misunderstanding is founded on the fact that the laws he made can only be judged based on their professional standards. Unfortunately (or fortunately) not; what then? Sympathy for example. This can be reached through the construction of informal human relations, through gaining friends and supporters. This is illuminated very well by the thematic issue of the International Relations journal which bears the title of Friendship in the International Relations. The moral here is that no matter how determined a government is in the representation of international affairs, without sufficient informal resources internationally, it will probably not be able to gain sufficient sympathy in the long run, which may even be the main cause of its failure.

Of course the Hungarian right is claiming that the West misunderstands the intentions of the Hungarian government. There is no sign so far that the Hungarian government is trying to strengthen its informal presence, as perhaps the most important instrument of modern political communication. The steps taken in the direction of making friends by Deputy Secretary of State Ferenc Kumin in order to influence the international environment and gain trust for the Hungarian government are important but far from enough.

The rejection of heterodox economics

In order to understand the source of international misgivings towards the Hungarian right-wing government’s economic policy, we have to at least refer on a basic level to the fact that we are talking about the protests of the representatives of a discipline that has been institutionalized for at least a century, against such an alternative theory of economics which is growing, however is still marginal. This is true even if in the past years several countries have used new, heterodox approaches in practice. The former French Prime Minister Nicolas Sarkozy set up a working group based on the recommendations of Professor Joseph Stiglitz which made a proposal on a new alternative way of measuring economic and social well-being.

At the same time we have to see that even if well-being is one of the success stories of theoretical economics the standard norm for the evaluation of governments is how consistent they are in the application of orthodox methods worked out by mainstream economics that have been implemented for several decades. The world of economists especially unites when the ruling notions are challenged by a country which (as we have already seen above) is perceived to be on the road to authoritarianism. In such cases there is a particularly small chance for a profound debate on the raison d’être for heterodox economic methods or for at least the acceptance of the partial validity of such methods.

We have to add also that György Matolesi’s personality obviously plays an important role in the judgment of the Hungarian right’s economic policy. We are not thinking about his frequent remarks which are at times funny or hard to understand (all politicians have off days) but about the fact that aside from his permanent literary activity he has hardly spoken publicly and with this he have up on introducing, explaining and protecting the economic policy preferred by him in front of the Hungarian public. It is not known that he shows more activity on the international level therefore we have to say here as well that the lack of informal relations caused at least as great damage as the following of heterodox principles.

The critique of anti-elitism and the “elimination” of freedom

management, governance and non governmental actors.

11 The thematic issue appeared in January 2011:

14 The fate of the concept of well-being is similarly adverse as that of heterodox economic policy, whereas an incredible amount of literature appears internationally concerning the topic and its economic aspects. See e.g. The thematic issue of The Australian Economic Review, March 2011, 59-102.
The Hungarian right’s stand on society plays an important role in the international indignation concerning it. Seemingly this is completely in line with the European approach. The Hungarian right follows the international trend according to which the government’s have to pay more and more attention to the needs of citizens. The international literature is full of writings on the “civic zeitgeist” and the governments are trying feverishly to bridge the lack of confidence coming at them from the part of citizens.15

Furthermore the Fidesz-government had already introduced the different national consultations at the beginning of the millennium which the liberal left side at the time labeled unnecessary and fraudulent unaware of the fact that left wing governments in Europe favored the use of this method as well. Before 2010 – during the second Gyurcsány government’s huge social deficit – the right managed to persuade everyone that it was the authentic representative of the people, which was reinforced by the 2010 elections.

On two points however, the Hungarian right is doing something different than to what the Western observers would wholeheartedly approve. One is that their support for society is coupled with a high level of anti-elitism. In this case anti-elitism appears in several ways. Fidesz is generally in a controversial relationship with the global political and financial elite as well as with their domestic “incarnations”. They have formulated the program of protecting Hungary in face of these elites in several speeches. Once again this strategy may lead Westerners to the conclusion that the Orbán-regime is not pro-Western, as if it were, it would aim at some sort of positive interaction with the actors that influence international processes. However we have explained above that in the approach of the right the multi-actor political interaction extending even to global elites is a burden for the government therefore should be avoided. Once again it is not an aspiration towards authoritarianism which is behind this but a nation-state centric approach to democracy where government has to guard the intactness of the nation-states sovereignty. Naturally this nation-state model is overridden for an average Western European citizen who is living his life in the social terrain of “diversity” allotted by globalization, multiculturality and immigration. A large and influential part of the West presumably cannot “forgive” Hungary that it suggests a picture of a closed introverted country contradicting Western experiences.

Aside from the contraposition of “society” and the “elite”, a further source of Western incomprehension is towards the “banning” of the newly appearing – spontaneous or just the opposite, very conscious – youth protests. In this case we mean the seizure of universities and the occupation of the Fidesz headquarters by university students and the government reactions connected to them. These types of events and even harsher ones took place in the West in 1968 just to mention one example. Naturally, it is less frequently mentioned by the West what great conflicts surrounded the movements of ’68; the outcome is what is important, the effects reached by the students at that time as well as the flexibility finally shown by the institutional system. The attitude of the ruling Hungarian government towards the HaHa student movement can be presented without further ado as the actions of a dictatorial government. This image is strengthened by the actions taken by the police against certain student movements which evoke memories of the methods with which the policemen of the late Kádár-era stepped up against the opposition of the time.

Lashing out at the “authoritarianism” of Orbán

All this is topped by (a significant part of) the West finding its “authoritarian” in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to prove its notion of an evolving authoritarian regime.

Let’s begin by stating that in post-1990 Hungarian democracy two perceptions of political leadership face each other. The right – ever since Fidesz belongs to this side – believes in a singular leadership; the ideal of the liberal-left is corporate leadership. Ferenc Gyurcsány’s experiment to create a charismatic, prestigious leader on the left as well shook this belief for a short period of time, however his experiment failed. Within the current race on the side of the opposition the question of “who will be the number one leader?” is very acute, however the main goal of the opposition parties (namely to overthrow Orbán) prolongs this problem at the moment. Apocalyptic pictures live in Europe (but mostly in the media) concerning Orbán’s personality and it is frequent that he is compared with Hitler or Mussolini. Naturally these comparisons have nothing to do with reality, however – as we have often emphasized – politics is not necessarily about reality. With a little imagination Orbán’s personality has traits which make him suitable to be presented as a dictator. One such example is his relentless, iron fisted direction of the right-wing nation transformation. To live with a historical comparison, this couples him with the “dictator” Robespierre in face of the “freedom loving” Danton and this is more than enough for the public. Furthermore in the eyes of the foreign
public he is seen as the conscious dismantler of public law. He is the one who is constantly defying the European Union moreover the European People’s Party as well. His characteristics all point in one direction and “predestine” him for the role of the dictator who cannot be reasoned with and is incapable of compromise.

He is the “negative” authority with whom the upholders of liberal democracy have to take up the fight with. In our opinion the Western observers are right in the sense that Orbán is not a liberal democrat. However they fail to understand that despite this he is not necessarily a “negative” authority for his own public and perhaps even for other layers too. Such an interpretation saw light not long ago in Le Monde.

Otherwise he would have had to fail from all the things that had happened during the past three years. Aside from the fact that early elections are in short supply in Hungary, the fact that he did not may be explained by the fact that there is a chronic shortage of “positive” authority in Hungarian politics. Even if Orbán “passes” in Hungary, internationally his position is problematic and the liberal political scientist Giovanni Sartori explains why. First of all, according to him every democracy is in need of authority. Second, “positive” authority increases, while “negative” authority decreases freedom. In the end, Orbán’s “tyranny” is proved in his unflagging attacks against freedom.

According to us it is far from true that Fidesz’s aim is to eliminate freedom, however it is a fact that the government’s actions are tough, conscious, comprehensive and – as we have shown – intend to transform the complete system. According to the Western critiques, the complete transformation of democracy, or to put it more precisely the complete dismantling of democracy is just one step away from the complete transformation of the system. Instead of the international public viewing Orbán similar to his idols, the great transformative politicians of the period following World War II, on the contrary, the image that has evolved in the past years of Viktor Orbán is of a politician who means a threat to Western values.

We can see that in the seven areas where Fidesz has massive and coherent ideas huge conflicts came about and the external medium react to them almost exclusively in a negative way. We could end our analysis here by saying that if Fidesz would like to retain its power it needs to offer not just “good governance” to its own public, but needs to win the support of the external community, or from the other side, the opposition, which is much better received internationally needs to defeat the currently governing party. However this is not enough. We may expect Fidesz to change its tactics but not its strategy. For the opposition to come to power it needs to do something completely different than currently, starting with the reinterpretation of Fidesz.

IV. The evaluation of the Hungarian right: ideological and historical aspects

Even if it collides with international opinion we have to admit Fidesz has well-defined notions about everything it would like to achieve in the world of politics. As we have shown in detail it has mobilized its whole apparatus in the interest of radically renewing the country and basically wants to change everything. The majority of the serious objections toward it stem from this. We haven’t spoken of two fundamental things so far. One (which basically frames the above mentioned seven cornerstones) is Fidesz’s approach to democracy. The other is positioning the Hungarian right in a wider historical context. The final part of the analysis focuses on these questions.

Why is Fidesz’s approach to democracy the way it is?

According to its critics the Hungarian right has not been following the model of liberal democracy for a long time now, what then is its approach towards democracy?

The claim for radical transformation is embedded in the Hungarian right’s approach to democracy, which appeared worldwide in the 1990’s - completely independent from the Hungarian issues - as an answer to the newest wave of democratization. At that time Western political scientists had to acknowledge that the process of consolidation had come to a halt; and that liberal democracies had transformed. Several categories arose for their definition such as defective, populist or illiberal democracies, the last being perhaps the most well known. How to interpret these (democratic but not liberal) competitors of liberal democracy?

The notion of liberal democracy (the organic connection of liberalism and democracy) came from the international consensus following 1945 and this connection characterized the 1989-90 Central Eastern European transformations as well. However the past decades questioned the sustainability of the unity of the two elements (liberalism and democracy) in Western Europe, not to mention Central Eastern Europe where the risk of the separation of the two components became a reality.

In this intensifying conflict Fidesz “naturally” stands on the side of national sovereignty and democracy and amidst its transformative actions feels that this element needs to be strengthened in face of the other component (liberalism). In this sense the Hungarian right comes into conflict concerning this aspect of democracy theory as well with the Western European consensus of the past decades.

Why (and in what direction) does Fidesz want to “develop” the system?

The other important aspect to evaluate aside from the Western European transformations of democracy is the historical one. We have to analyze Fidesz’s policy from this direction as well in order to find different explanations behind the “facts” of the past three years.

We have to pose the question, how come Fidesz remains constantly the most popular party if Fidesz’s politics is rejected to such an extent as we have seen in the III. unit? This question can not be answered from the “facts” of the past three years we have to turn to “softer” sociological, historical factors. Our hypothesis is that Fidesz holds on to its position despite its actions because the style of governance better expresses the historical traditions than the politics of the liberal-left which is stuck in the present and pronouncedly at odds with traditions.

While Europe has basically rejected the radical politics of Fidesz we have to establish that the Hungarian right’s strength and advantage comes from this as well. From a different aspect, that of Hungarian history, the radical break which we have outlined above is in fact continuity. Continuity plays a great role in party politics. The processes of change and continuity are handled together in Western European analyses of party system change. The importance of the second element waned during the Hungarian change of regime as no one wanted to identify with contemporary history (the Kádár-era) and even less with the Horthy-era. For a long time change was dominant in the development.

16 Sartori uses the terms “authoritarian authority” and “venerable authority” as well. See Giovanni Sartori: Demokratia. Orosz Kiadó, 1999. 103.
of the parties. Fidesz could rise above its small party entity because it discovered the importance of the other element, that of continuity. It could authentically play the role of the party that preserves and represents historical values.

It is very hard to “erase” history from politics. Great leaps forward are never without recoils or U-turns. We see a very strong counteraction from the beginning of the millennium compared to 1989-90. If the elites of the Central Eastern European transitions demolished the Socialist systems under the flag of the “end of history” (in other words the global triumph of liberal democracy) then the decisive trend of the start of the millennium was that history is far from “over” the debate and solution of historically unsolved questions has just begun. Without the general change of this trend we could not explain the permanent failure of the Hungarian liberal-left governments (between 2002-2010), the great gain in popularity of Fidesz following 2006 or its 2/3’s victory in the 2010 elections. An important part of this change of trend is that values and ethical categories come into the forefront opposite the pragmatic (mainly macroeconomic) actions of the governments. This is why a majority of the Hungarian society did not value the macroeconomic recovery activities of the Bajnai-government between 2009-2010 and turned rather to Fidesz which preferred traditional values and the “elevation” of society. Following 2006 it became clear if Fidesz wins in 2010 it will not join the relative consensus of party politics preceding 2006 but will break away in every sense from them leading the country towards solutions unknown to the Hungarian public.

In our view the liberal-left side did not and does not pay enough attention to this “unexpected” return of history, it is constantly fighting against it. We can establish that a part of its problems comes from this bluntness. The liberal-left does not understand or does not want to acknowledge that history in Hungary does not just consist of the inter-war period. We have shown above that the political claim for the radical change of rigid structures originates from the Reform Era, except this idea was dismissed with the change of regime since they thought the transformation complete. The intention of the Hungarian right to “develop” the system in order to finish the change of regime equals the “demolishment” of the transition for its opponents. Therefore if we pose the question of whether Fidesz’s politics is successful our answer is definitely not. We understand the intentions of the Hungarian right however (as of now) this experiment does not have a chance of truly renewing Hungarian politics, however will lead to the permanence of the constitutional battles as long as the right remains in power. We see Fidesz’s experiment as grandiose but – taking into consideration historical aspects – with a small chance of success. Not because it would lead to authoritarianism or tyranny. Because we are doubtful whether at the beginning of the XXI. century it is possible to create such a type of national transformation that was suggested in the Reform Era. However we also see that Hungary can not stay in the state it was in 2010, and we have learned from Lajos Bokros that only critical mass of reforms can be successful.