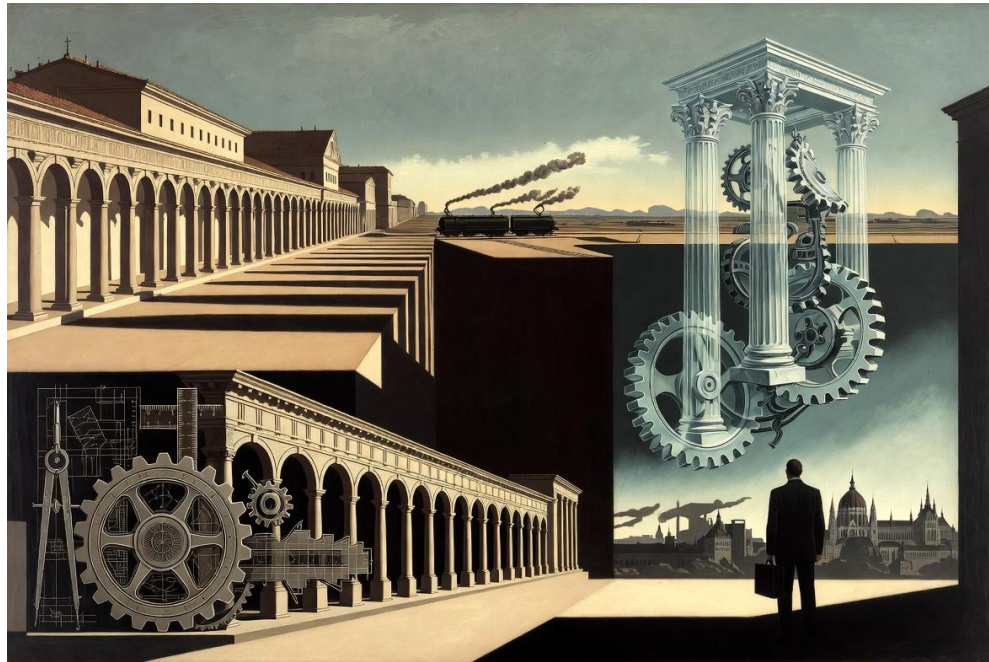


Zoltán Novák

Operational Pragmatism



The Tisza Party's electoral program has been approached in many different ways, which may also stem from the conflict and speculation surrounding the document. But what interests us now is not the dynamics of how those antecedents have been thematized. We will also refrain from analyzing the program's public policy foundations, the feasibility of its promises, or the pattern of the worldview that emerges from it. This time, we ask only one question: what is the character of this program?

We can answer that most precisely if we uncover what kind of mission the whole of the text reveals, and what the vision outlined in the document holds to be the essence of governance.

In this case, however, we are compelled to read between the lines. We are not asking the obligatory questions of what the text identifies as a problem, what diagnosis it builds on that basis, what solutions it offers in response, what commitments and promises it makes in light of this, and how realistic those are. Instead, we are looking for the fundamental mode of speech and self-interpretation that organizes the text as a whole, which ultimately answers the question of how the text's internal logic legitimizes its will to power.

The text's internal organizing principle is best described by the category of operational pragmatism, and this construction also defines the horizon of its political self-interpretation. In essence, operational pragmatism combines the ethos of professionalism with the trope of realist exercise of authority.

In this case, operativity means an outlook that interprets the effectiveness of governance not in the dimension of ideological self-realization, but derives it from professional functionality, while translating the essence of political conflicts into the

language of problems to be solved. According to the program's diagnosis, the current dysfunction of the Hungarian state is not a random error, but the consequence of a kind of "learned helplessness." Within this framework, the text proclaims not simply a change of power, but a complete change in the function of power: it seeks to shift the state into a "service-oriented" and "accountable" mode of operation. This is most evident where the program transforms public policy issues into technical-managerial tasks. In healthcare, for example, it does not open a principled debate about financing models, but promises an immediate capital injection of 500 billion HUF and the dramatic reduction of waiting lists, effectively treating patient care as a logistical challenge.

At the same time, the pragmatic dimension depoliticizes in ideological terms. The program makes a conspicuous effort to integrate elements that are far removed from one another, and even presents this as a virtue: "there is no right, there is no left, only Hungarians," while among the listed values one finds sovereignty and Europeanness, respect for tradition and equal opportunity, performance and solidarity, freedom and security all at once. Pragmatism here does not mean that there are no values, but that the program treats conflicts between values not as political fault lines, but as details within a larger project of national restoration. One of the most important consequences

of this is the sidelining of the “culture war”: the program’s identity is not built on these, but rather on functionality, institutional order, and the restoration of public services. This outlook also treats corruption not merely as a moral category, but as a loss that gravely undermines the efficiency of the system, the elimination of which generates direct economic benefit for the community.

Pragmatism also appears in the realm of foreign policy and national strategy. The program breaks with the “ferry-country role” and with “cozying up to the East,” but not in the name of Euro-optimism. Rather, it does so because it regards Western institutional anchors, such as the European Public Prosecutor’s Office or EU funds to be indispensable instruments of national prosperity. Overall, the Tisza program is not the birth of a new ideology, but an attempt to depoliticize politics: an offer that presupposes on the voters’ side not a creed, but a rational demand for a “well-functioning state.”

The program presents itself as a project that draws legitimacy from the authority of professional functionality, and seeks to reorganize politics through the formula of restoring a “functioning, humane state.” This outlook understandably has appeal in Hungarian public life, but precisely for that reason it should not be interpreted as the absence of ideologies, but as

their repackaging within the framework of the ethos of functionality, order, and professionalism.

This is why operational pragmatism carries both a resource and a risk at the same time. It is a resource because it offers an easy to understand answer, in the register of “normality,” to the Hungarian political system’s enduring functional crisis, thereby providing voters with a broad coalition language in an extremely polarized society. It is a risk because the aura of professionalism can easily become an authority placed above political debate, while the claim that “we transcend ideologies” does not eliminate those decision-making situations in which choice is necessarily value-based.

Operational pragmatism, then, is a strong but double-edged political sword, because in governance there are many questions in which the decisive issue is not what works and what does not, but what the goal of that functioning is, and at what cost. In such moments, the post-ideological outlook inevitably faces a test, because value conflict does not disappear. At most, it is postponed, or returns in another dimension.