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## **Election in Hungary '18**

### **Why liberalism and democracy went separate ways**

On March 15, one of the most important Hungarian national holidays, the Hungarian government took many people to the streets. The opposition parties could mobilize a lot less but the April 8 elections obviously will not be decided by how many people take to the streets.

Europe is obviously following the Hungarian elections with stepped-up interest and thinks that the illiberal governing party is facing the democratic opposition. In a previous article of mine I had referred to the fact that the problem with the so called democratic opposition – despite all appearances – is that it is not European enough. This time I would add that it is not democratic enough.

The narrative that appears in the US and Western Europe according to which the alliance of liberalism and democracy had been broken, hardly appears in Hungary. The Hungarian opposition talks effortlessly about the fact that Viktor Orbán is an autocrat and that the system led by him is an autocracy – and with this it considers the act of the defining of the system complete. Where there is an autocracy one has to overthrow it – this is how the common mission statement of the multi-party opposition could be summarized.

However this approach does not want to face the problem to which many public intellectuals have called attention to in the past years. It is enough to quote Dani Rodrik who in a recently published article of his says that liberal democracy is threatened by „two perversions”: illiberal democracy and non-democratic liberalism.

In many of her essays, Sheri Berman also derives the main conflict of today from the fact that liberalism and democracy have locked horns, for example here and here. Aside from these texts and authors however there are many others that outline clearly this tension.

Nevertheless in Hungary little attention is paid to the ever stronger diversion of the two components of liberal democracy. The supporters of liberal democracy can not imagine that this separation could take place, or if it does, then that could only happen as a result of an autocratic power's horrible politics. In this way, they put all blame on the government of Viktor Orbán and the governing party Fidesz.

A question arises though for someone who is trying to be objective. How could Viktor Orbán single-handedly demolish Hungarian democracy? Why wasn't there much greater resistance on part of society and the opposition to prevent this?

This is one of the greatest questions for Hungary which is yet to be solved. The opposition is completely right in the fact that the Orbán regime has created a completely different world in Hungary since 2010. But this world – and this is the essence of my answer – stems logically

from the historical traditions that have accumulated over the centuries. Of course readers may ask, how come it is not possible to overcome century old traditions? The answer is that it is possible but only for short periods of time. Between 1990 and 2010 it seemed that democratization would be enduring and Hungarian society would surpass its traditions. Today it is clear that transitology, which was popular at the time of the Central Eastern European transitions, overestimated the power of change. Levitsky and Way talk of this in a very illustrative way, even if not in a Hungarian context. We have to see also that the ten-fifteen years following the change of regime did not bring the kind of ascent that for example the post-1945 democratizations caused all over Europe.

Hungarian society became dissatisfied with the results of the change of regime and terminated the tacit agreement with the parties that followed one another in power every four years. In the mid-2000's, during the rule of the left wing prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, Hungarian society started to return to its own historical traditions.

Within this tradition we can see parties that govern for several terms. There have been parties with a 2/3 or even larger majority in Hungarian history several times. While it is possible that Viktor Orbán will start his third consecutive term in 2018, this isn't extraordinary. It is out of the ordinary compared to the first two decades following the change of regime.

Whoever wins the elections in April cannot disregard the fact that it will have to rethink the presence of historical trends and patterns of behavior in our times. In light of these historical processes liberal democracy prevails much more difficultly in Hungary, and as Sheri Berman says, perhaps has to make headway against long periods of illiberalism.

History mustn't be disregarded, we must call upon it for help. We cannot understand anything of Hungarian politics if we only look at it through the paradigms of transitology and consolidology. If we take history into consideration we will have a much better understanding of why liberalism and democracy split in Hungary.