

social issues & initiatives

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“A Communist Always Tells Lies”

The state ideology imposed by Moscow was hated in Hungary not only on account of the terror and restrictions to freedom but also due to its core that was felt to be a lie. This was, namely, the promise to make all people equal and happy. "A communist always tells lies" is therefore the slogan of moderate and radical anti-communists alike in Eastern Europe, and it was also to be heard during the Budapest protest demonstrations on Parliament Square in autumn 2006. Disputes between the left, the right and the liberals are splitting the country at the moment and the week-long demonstrations on Parliament Square after the "lie speech" of socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány seemed like a predictable accident. Nevertheless, their official labels do not correspond with the real contents of the individual parties. An analysis of the events, the confusion and the historic backgrounds.

The grandest celebration in Hungary during the turbulent year 2006 was, of all things, a funeral. Ferenc Puskas, the Hungarian football legend who died in November last after a long and difficult illness, was buried in the crypt of St Stephen's Basilica in Budapest after a funeral lasting six hours. Soldiers in historic costume escorted the coffin to the church, on a traditional horse-drawn carriage, international sports VIPs and the State President gave obituaries, a choir sang angelically. The concept of the "beautiful corpse" fits in well with the traditional longing for death that, combined with pessimism, has always been regarded as a characteristic of the Hungarians. The next day the left-wing liberal daily "Nepszabadsag", sarcastically remarked that the "dead man of the nation" had been "peacefully buried" without any political disputes and that this was a sensation. Normally every major event in Hungary is accompanied by party political wranglings. This was also the case in the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian anti-communist rebellion in 1956. The liberal left-wing government and the right-wing conservative opposition celebrated separately. On the one hand the right wing generally accuse the left wing of being the intellectual heirs of the Stalinist communists. On the other hand the riots that erupted shortly before the 1956 celebrations in response to the "lie speech" of socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány had further hardened the two fronts. Disputes between the left, the right and liberals are splitting the county, putting an end to friendships in Hungary, breaking up marriages. To this extent the riots, the attacks of the right-wing mob on the television building, the demonstrations on Parliament Square that continued for weeks after Gyurcsány's "lie speech" were like a predictable accident. The cause was spectacular: In September an internal party speech was made public in which Gyurcsány reproached himself and his party friends with having kept quiet about the disastrous budgetary situation as well as the plans for cut backs in order to win the parliamentary elections in spring 2006. " We lied, morning, noon and night" said Gyurcsány. The aim of this speech was to shake up his own people, to make it clear to them that things could not go on this way, that the Hungarian people had to be told the truth. Nevertheless the word "lie" that Gyurcsány used several times was a loaded one. It was, so it seemed, the last kick that Hungary's conservatives and right-wing extremists needed to take to the streets. That it came to scenes of

violence was initially due to the same irrational reasons that football hooligans throughout the world lash out with baseball bats. The reasons why thousands of normally well-behaved citizens took to the streets for weeks and sympathized with the rioters ran far deeper. Ostensibly it was the difficult word "lie" that almost throughout the former East Bloc is identified with communism. The state ideology imposed by Moscow was hated not only due to the terror and restrictions to freedom associated with it but also on account of its core promise that was regarded as a lie: namely the promise to make all people equal and happy. "A communist always tells lies" is therefore the slogan of anti-communists in Eastern Europe, both moderates and radicals alike, and it was to be heard during the protest demonstrations in Budapest. At the same time the popular protest against the left-wing liberal government reveals a typical (not only in Hungary) blurring of the terms "left wing" and "right wing". Although officially a socialist, Gyurcsány is not left-wing. With his programme of cutbacks aimed at reducing the catastrophic budget deficit, his promotion of efficiency, competition and the attraction of foreign investors with the intention of creating more jobs, he in fact proposes the same kind of neo-liberalism as Tony Blair. The demonstrators that see themselves to be right-wing and nationalist, on the other hand, demanded an etatist welfare policy such as keeping the hospitals under state control despite their high deficits, and higher pensions. "If anyone has a reason to organise protest demonstrations in Hungary it is the cheated socialist voters. But we never see demonstrators with a red flag", writes Gáspár Miklós Tamás, professor of philosophy in Budapest and one of the most interesting and unconventional thinkers and animators of political debate in Hungary who is accorded great respect, even when he is not correct. So Tamás, who is also known under his trademark TGM (after the initials of his name), last summer called upon the people to punish the socialists by boycotting the local elections being held at the time throughout the country. The bourgeois socialists, he said, should in this way be forced to remember "the left-wing minimum" which means the primacy of social justice. The local elections, that were held shortly after Gyurcsány's "lie scandal" were then in fact won by the right-wing conservative FIDESZ party under populist politician Viktor Orbán. Tamás, however, does not see the political fronts in Hungary in terms of "left" or "right" but in terms of old political images that have irreconcilably confronted each other ever since the anti-Habsburg revolt. On the one side are the "dogmatic modernisers", who in earlier times were the pro-Habsburg party and adherents of the Enlightenment, and today are the cosmopolitan, pragmatic and urban left-wing liberals. On the other side are the "affronted nationalists" who in earlier times formed the anti-imperial resistance and today present themselves in a number of political shades, ranging from right wing to extreme right. Both then and now, according to Tamás, the yearning for a rural, supposedly better old Hungary, the rejection of the urban and the foreign form a part of their basic feelings. The dominant fundamental feeling of the left-wing liberals is the primacy of reason, whereas with the right wing it is passion. This was expressed in the election campaigns of both blocks. Orbán's FIDESZ irrationally promised hundreds of thousands of new jobs and a 14th pension payment during the year, after his party had already voted in parliament against paying the pension 13 times a year. The socialist liberals also promised a great deal but pragmatically shrouded this in generalisations and slogans of a non-specific kind. In Tamás' interpretation the dominant feeling among the right wing is a self-pitying "cult of defeat". In a heightened form this leads to many on the right viewing the defeat by the Turks at Mohács, Hungary's enormous loss of territory after the First World War – and even the defeated revolution of 1956 – as "forgotten victories". To this extend the struggle in front of the television building last autumn could enter the collective memory of the Hungarian right as a further heroic myth. According to Tamás his unequal distribution of the willingness to express passion explains, why in Hungary it is the right wing

rather than the left that take to the streets in demonstrations. The "authentic left", he maintains, leaves no trace on this dual value system in Hungary. Tamás argues from a Marxist starting point that he came to in a roundabout manner. Born in 1948 in Cluj (Klausenburg) in Transylvania (Romania) he emigrated to Hungary in 1978 and taught the history of philosophy in Budapest. Three years later he was dismissed because in communist Hungary he criticised Marxism in front of the students. After this he taught at Yale University, among others. Immediately after the collapse of communism he became a founding member of the Hungarian liberals (SZDSZ) and as a member of the executive committee was one of their leading functionaries for years. Towards the end of the 1990s Tamás took a turn to the left and became a leading member of the anti-globalism organisation ATTAC. Those who employed violence during the Budapest riots were for the most part young, but this is not definite proof of the formation of a political front in Hungary that is determined by the generations, but tends more to confirm Tamás' thesis of the inclination towards outbursts of passion as a political motor, which is common to the right wing and to younger people. Among the peaceful demonstrators on Parliament Square there were people from all generations and also from very different social groups: from a young rocker to a female teacher close to retirement age. The shards of glass left by the riots has long since been cleared away, more than 100 rioters have been arrested. The professional politicians now occupy the stage once again. Opposition leader Orbán calls on the EU not to support the "mendacious" Gyurcsány government. His plan to defeat the package of cutback measures by means of seven referendums was defeated largely by the resistance of the national electoral commission. Meanwhile the parliament is passing one economy measure after the other – practice fees, reductions in pensions – while the government is making an effort to keep in the country those investors who are protesting against higher taxation. The first compromise has already had to be made with the largest investor in the country, Audi, which is based in Győr in western Hungary. The daughter of the German company is allowed to deduct the costs of research and development from the new 4 per cent solidarity tax. A pragmatic, left-wing liberal solution.

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