Book Review

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Forfeiting Democracy – The Case of Hungary. Book Review: Péter Krasztev & Jon van Til (eds., 2015): The Hungarian Patient. Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy. Budapest-New York: CEU Press

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Hungary was alone with its right-wing, anti-democratic government in early 2015, when Péter Krastev and Jon van Til published their book. Since then Europe's political bias towards the right has increased significantly. In late 2015 the right-wing Law-and-Justice-Party has gained 39% of the votes in Poland's general election. The party of Jarosław Kaczyński built a government and started on a path very similar to this of Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ government in Hungary with a major target: to dismantle democracy. In Austria's presidential election, a cliffhanger victory of the green party's candidate prevented Europe from having its first far-rightist head of state in the post-Nazi era. In France, the National Front achieved 27% of all the votes in the first round of regional elections in 2015, then being defeated in the second round. Still the National Front's leader Marine Le Pen is a serious candidate in next year's presidential election. In Germany, Sweden, Norway, and Switzerland, together with Austria the wealthiest European countries, far-right parties are gaining ground. Altogether, there is an alarming rise of far-right parties in many European countries, and many international observers like the New York Times and the Economist are worried.

The reasons of these developments are manifold and cannot be enumerated exhaustively. More recently, the refugee crisis and the fear of immigrants have driven votes to parties that proclaim simple solutions like the closure of boundaries. More in-depth, it is maybe the loss of purpose and mission that concerns all the traditional Christian-democratic and social-democratic parties, and the lack of vision and charismatic leadership of the European Union in the aftermath of the economic crisis. Whenever European integration loses its enthusiasm and inspiration, nationalism of all sorts comes out of the woodwork again.

Against this backdrop, *The Hungarian Patient* should be compulsory reading for all Europeans, at least for those engaged in policy making and in Civil Society. In an alarming way, this book shows to which end the rightist takeover leads: to a complete deconstruction of liberal democracies, to the destruction of

checks and balances and to the abolition of the separation of powers. This anthology comprises 17 chapters written mainly by Hungarian scholars, former politicians, and civil society activists. They provide a kaleidoscopic insight into the reasons and consequences of the Hungarian transformation. The chapters cover various topics: the tale of FIDESZ' seizure of power, the shift in gender discourse, the domestication of traditional nonprofits, to rise of new social movements, the discriminatory policy towards the Romani, the rise of the extreme-right anti-Semitic Jobbik party, the parallels between Belarus and Hungary, and finally a partly optimistic outlook by Jon van Til.

When I read *The Hungarian Patient*, I lived in the US and witnessed the victory of Donald Trump in the GOP primaries rather closely, and at the same time I supported the Green candidate in the tight race for presidency in my home country Austria. Against this backdrop, reading Péter Krastev's and Jon van Til's book was highly appalling. As a starter, András Bozóki, a professor of political science at Central European University and former minister of culture in the Gyurcsány cabinet between 2005 and 2006, provided a detailed background report about 'Broken Democracy, Predatory State, and Nationalist Populism'. Bozóki tells how the Hungarian regime was hollowed out by partisan division and feud, how the stage war prepared for Victor Orban, and how democratic structures were immediately deconstructed in the aftermath of the 2010 elections by those authoritarian elites promote the gospels of ethno-nationalism.

Even more daunting is the detailed legal analysis by Miklós Bánkúti, Gábor Halmai, and Kim Lane Scheppele, titled 'Hungary's Illiberal Turn: Disabling the Constitution'. The authors describe the furious process by which FIDESZ cobbled together a new constitution for Hungary in a few months following its election win in 2010. FIDESZ first removed the last restraints on a government with a two-thirds majority. Then they attacked and drastically weakened the Constitutional Court. FIDESZ simply altered the system for nominating constitutional judges, and then restricted the court's jurisdiction. The next steps were undermining and inhibiting any referendum process, then asserting control over the media, and finally installing a FIDESZ loyalist as president. In the very end, a new constitution was pushed through parliament. There have been protests and infringement actions against Hungary for violating European Law by the European Union, but they were muffled and with little effect up to now.

In 2009, Victor Orban states: "There is a real chance that politics in Hungary will no longer be defined by a dualist power space. ... Instead, a large governing party will emerge in the center of the political stage [that] will formulate national policy, not through constant debates but through a natural representation of interests." (45) No one can complain that the objectives of FIDESZ have not been clear before the elections in 2010. The discourse applied in Hungary resembles

the discourse that all the fascist parties applied in the 1920ties and 30ties: liberal democracies are weak, parliaments are talking shops, strong fascist parties are much better to represent the population's will and interests. In the "Hungarian Patient", many authors report how this discourse that has emerged in the field of politics has widely occupied other fields and shaped their discursive pattern. Many chapters analyze these transformations in an in-depth way. In this review, only a few of them can be picked out.

Péter Bajomi-Lázár describes media capture and the significant decrease of the freedom of press. Until 2010, Hungarian media have been under multiparty control. Since 2010, FIDESZ has taken over control by the so called "Multimedia Act" that regulates all outlets by a new supervisory body chaired by a former FIDESZ politician. Ágnes Kövér reports about the quietness and suppression of Civil Society Organizations which have been captured by state and/or by church: "The short and sad story of the Hungarian civil sector ... concludes ... with a highly manipulated, monopolized, and authority based system, one where citizens confront few alternatives beyond settings that are controlled and dominated by the central party." (89) Angéla Kóczé complains that for the Romani living in Hungary, the initial promise of the postcommunist era has ended in an even worse disappointment and social and economic deprivation. Romani are further threatened by the rise of radical right in Hungary, as András Tóth and István Grajczár claim in their chapter on the Jobbik party, a party with a racist and anti-Semitic ideology that was not even imaginable in Europe for decades. Eventually, Ágnes Kövér elaborates on the shifts in gender discourse: "Disparaging and condescending manners and overt sexism are quite prevalent among representatives of so-called traditional values who concentrate around the governing parties." (125).

There are a few aspects that are especially tragic about the Hungarian case, and that are different from other countries with strong civic movements that turned over governments in 'color revolutions', as Ivan Krastev (2007) name it in "Reclaiming Democracy". Péter Krastev explains these barriers in his chapter on 'Social Responses': First, Hungary is already an EU member, and therefore there is no external interest to aligning Hungary more strongly with the European Union (as was the case in Ukraine, Georgia, and Serbia). Second, the European reaction upon the FIDESZ takeover and the many constitutional transformations that violate European values has been very cautious and absurdly weak until now. It was even harsher in 2000, when the right-wing Freedom Party entered a coalition government in Austria. Third, those in power are aware of everyone's political associations and monitoring any form of activism, especially at the local level. Those in opposition have no access to any public funding or any public arena. Finally, performers and artists and all the prominent actors in

other fields (sports, professions, and business) of Hungarian society are scared that they will find themselves on blacklists. Therefore it is rather some spotty spontaneous resistance that can be observed in Hungary. A revolution is not in sight.

This book does not present outstanding academic research. Yet it is a very important book that deserves many readers especially in Europe. Therefore, my review is not an academic review, but a European citizen's view on an eminently political book. It provides many very different expert views on the transformations of society in Hungary since FIDESZ takeover in 2010. Thus the book teaches us that right wing parties must not be downplayed. If they come into power, they will execute what they've always promised, they will do harm to democracy. Whereas the reader by Jörg Forbrig and Pavol Deměs in 2007 was titled "Reclaiming Democracy", this one by Péter Krastev and Jon van Til might be also titled "Forfeiting Democracy". It is much to be hoped that this does not become a successful sequence, that Hungarians will regain their democracy as soon as possible, and that European neighbors and institutions will finally reawaken and support resistance against the FIDESZ regime.

References

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