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Cultural War and Reinventing the Past in Poland and Hungary:

The Politics of Historical Memory in East-Central Europe¹

Abstract: This paper has been based on three assumptions that have been widely discussed in the international political science: (1) there has been a decline of democracy in East-Central Europe (ECE) with the emergence of “velvet dictatorships”, (2) the velvet dictatorships rely on the soft power of media and communication rather on the hard power of state violence that has provoked “cultural wars” and (3) the basic turning point is the transition from the former modernization narrative to the traditional narrative with “reinventing the past” and “reconceptualising modernity” through the reference to the historically given collective national identity by launching the “politics of historical memory”. The velvet dictatorships have been using and abusing the national history as an ideological drug to consolidate their power. The (social and national) populism and Euroscepticism are the basic twin terms to describe the soft power of the new (semi)authoritarian regimes. They are convertible, the two sides of the same coin, since they express the same divergence from the EU mainstream from inside and outside. Soft power means that the political contest in the regimes has been transferred from the hard to the soft fields as the between the confronting narratives. The victory of the traditionalist-nativist narrative carries also the message that the people are only passive “subjects” and not active citizens, so the field of politics has been extremely narrowed in the “new brave world” in ECE.

Keywords: *Hungary; Poland; East-Central Europe; historical memory; politics of memory; cultural war; reinventing the past*

¹ This paper is part of my longer paper in the project “National narratives and ‘Europe’ after the crisis”. The topic of the European identity versus national identities and the relevant narratives

Failed high expectations and deep impact of global crisis on the ECE narrative

The ECE countries have been among those worst hit by the global crisis. The decline of democracy and the weakening of global competitiveness have been the common historical trajectory in the last decade. The ECE backsliding has been a special case of the European crisis and this paper concentrates only on this special ECE crisis, discussing it in the case of the parallel Polish and Hungarian developments (see recently Chadwick, 2016). The main effects of global crisis have been similar in all ECE countries that have led to the failure of the high expectations in the Europeanization after the last Quarter-Century. Nowadays the effects of global crisis have still been active, therefore, there is no “post-crisis” situation yet. The basic socio-economic situation has not returned to the pre-crisis level of economic growth and the freedom fight ideology has become very popular.²

In the myth-making perspective on the historical narratives, all social organizations need to construct myths in order to legitimize their existence and to provide a collective identity for their members (Della Sala, 2010, see also Negotiating Modernity Project, 2015; and Fossum and Menéndez, 2014). Some decades after the WWII there has also been a “memory boom” based on the “collective remembrance of the Great War” (see first of all Winter, 1998 and Lebow et al., eds, 2006). This memory boom has appeared in ECE later, when the frustrations of the “revolutions of 1989” have led to the slogan of “unfinished revolutions” (Mark, 2010) and to the “theory of memory” (Blacker, Ekind and Fedor, 2013).

In the ECE region “the history matters”: the defensive national identity has come from the historical defeats, from the controversial history of nation/state-building as an interrupted and unfinished process even before the EU membership. This overload of history in the collective national memory has resulted in the defensive and negative collective identities against the “other” that has mostly been represented by

has been discussed for decades, see e.g. the Special Issue of *Journal of Common Market Studies* edited by Della Sala (2010) and Gaxie et al. (eds) (2011), or the discourse of EU elites (Real Dato et al., 2012). This topic has been again high on the agenda due to the recent refugee crisis (see the Special Issue with Manners and Murray, 2016, and the Polish debates, e.g. Potyrala, 2016 and Wawrzynski et al. 2016).

² I have described the ECE crisis in my former papers (Ágh, 2015a,b,c and 2016b,c) and in some recent papers I have focused on the parallel developments between Poland and Hungary (Ágh, 2015d and 2016b). See for this parallel BT, 2016a,b and FH, 2016a,b. On the general ECE situation see also Banac, 2014; Bernhard and Jasiewicz, 2015; BT, 2015; EC, 2015; European Catch-Up Index; and IMF, 2014.

the EU. Hence, in the ECE case there has been the construction of black-and-white narratives on the nation-state building as fighting with enemies, i.e. as a constant freedom fight against the oppressive foreign powers. The modernity as catching up with the West-European developments (Europeanization or Westernization) has to be analysed against the background of this historical trajectory. Collective identities in 19th century, when the modern nations emerged in Central Europe, appeared as “nation-religions” and these “nation-religions” have survived in the ECE region in more or less secularized forms. The Hungarian National Anthem is a Pray to God that constantly reinforces “the loser–nation syndrome”.

There has always been a fight of the two main narratives in ECE: the modernization narrative (“look at Paris” – a famous, often repeated slogan referring the French Revolutions) and the traditionalisation narrative (the “Glorious Past that Never Was”, remembering the Golden Age of national history). In some progressive periods the modernization narrative was the dominant, but in the decline periods the traditionalisation narrative came back with a vengeance. Since the 1980s, again, there has been a search for the identities, first of all for the national identity suppressed by the state socialism, therefore the fight of these two narratives as a new cultural war has intensified. There has been no national consent about the historical turning point in 1945, the end of WWII in a post-Yalta situation. For the large part of population it was the liberation from the Nazi rule, but for the others it was just the start of Soviet occupation with a loss of national sovereignty, and both were relevant, indeed.³

In the 1980s Poland and Hungary were the trendsetters in Europeanization among the young democracies, therefore after 1989, in the first decade there was a successful period in the “Return to Europe” scenario. The Europeanization/Modernization narrative became dominant and the expectations were very high, in fact too high, mostly based on a view of this twin exceptionalism of Poland and Hungary. This narrative promised an “easy dream” of catching up with “Europe” in the near future. I have tried to describe this situation in my former papers as the “Sleeping Beauty” scenario versus the “Decent Cinderella” scenario. The dream of quick Europeanization in the semi-periphery relied on the conceptual frame of “Western fallacy”, according to which the rapid Western developments after WWII can be repeated. Thus, instead of “Powerful Europe” the Prosperous Europe was the core of the modernization narrative (Marcussen, 1999). It was rather explicitly assumed that the “golden thirty years” from the post-war West European history can also be imported, and with

³ Behind the cultural wars there is a search for the national and European identities, see Hansen and Williams, 1999, Akman and Kassim, 2010 and Kolvraa, 2016, especially in the “East” (Bureau et al., 2014; Cabada, 2014 and Case, 2009).

the rapid socio-economic developments all contradictions of democratic transition would be automatically solved. This naïve approach has been refuted by the facts, and it has proven to be counter-productive, since it has led deep apathy and general dissatisfaction of the populations concerned in the 2000s that has been culminated in the long global crisis.

In the new situation with the changing focus, the former “Kulturkampf” has continued and the ECE public discourse has been split more and more between the two dominant narratives of the EU-centred Modernization and the Nation State-centred Traditionalisation. Obviously, under the drastic impact of global crisis there has been a drastic change in the content of the two dominant narratives. Although the continuity in both cases has been strong, the main effects of global crisis have not appeared only in their changing contents, but first of all in their relationship. Simply said, the major change due to the global crisis is that the Nation-State/Traditionalisation narrative has defeated the Europeanization/Modernization narrative in ECE. After the mass disappointment due to the failure of the long catching up process and aggravated by the effects of global crisis, this historical traditionalising narrative has offered itself as the best explanation for the repeated failure to “Return to Europe” and for the necessity for the freedom fight against the new dependence from Brussels. This freedom fight narrative has proven to be a “Successful Political Myth” and it has gone through the three stages of “diffusion”, “ritual” and “sacredness” (Della Sala, 2010, p. 7–9). In the third stage the freedom fight narrative has been constructed by the governments as same kind of “official mythology” (Akman & Kassim, 2010, p. 115) for the “discursive opportunities” (DOS) that has been propagated by all public media and its refusal has been qualified by the power elite as “high treason” of national interests.

The “velvet dictatorships” in Hungary and Poland: the strength of soft power

Nowadays, the new forms of “dictatorships” in Europe and its neighbourhood have modernized themselves. They do not apply direct oppression but they use the “velvet fist” of media hegemony in which the dominant narrative plays a central role. As Adam Michnik (2015) has noted, “After the velvet revolutions the time has come for the velvet dictatorships.” (see also The Telegraph, 2015). According to the well-known proverb, those who do not cope with the burden of history, are sentenced to repeat it. The new velvet dictatorships are not ready for learning from the history, from the mistakes of the past. Just to the contrary, they abuse the historical memory for their own legitimation and consolidation. Due to the global crisis, instead of

the “end of history” there has been a brutal return of history as an ideology of this “velvet dictatorship”. They have not been using “hard power” – open oppression and direct means of eliminating the opposition –, but the sophisticated indirect means of “soft power” for the legitimation and consolidation of the “illiberal democracy” (Polyák, 2015). The analysts of ECE politics have emphasized (see above all Rupnik and Zielonka, 2013 that “the politics of historical memory” has played an important role in the establishment and consolidation of new (semi-)authoritarian regimes, e.g. in Poland and Hungary. The process of reshaping the past by the manipulation of the traditional historical narrative has produced the series of old-new monuments in the remade historical places and the rituals of remembering the “newly introduced” historical events on the national holidays. In fact, the governments in the 2010s have changed both the “hardware” and “software” of historical memory (see Blacker and Etkind, 2013: 5) for reinforcing the hegemony of their traditionalising, freedom fight narrative as the recent chapter of the “always changing past”.⁴

Abby Innes has identified two types of political developments in ECE, “the party state capture” and “the corporate state capture”. In the former the political motivation dominates in the new elite, they transform the state according to their values and expectations, like in Poland and Hungary, therefore “The EU’s leverage is necessarily limited in the cases of party state capture” (Innes, 2014: 101).

Due to its early arrival of deeper crisis, Hungary offers the worst case scenario of the velvet dictatorships as the “Hungarian Patient” (Krasztev & van Til, 2015). This worst case scenario has been completed by the elected autocracy in the latest elections in 2014. Fidesz, the national-populist party has elaborated a traditionalising historical narrative built on the “Glorious Past that Never Was”, i.e. on the Greater Hungary defending the whole (Christian) Europe for centuries, but becoming later a victim of great powers’ invasion. The freedom fight against foreign powers was always one of the main discourses in Hungary, so it has been rather easy for Fidesz to concoct a strange *mélange* on the Vienna-Moscow-Brussels historical trajectory of external dependence as a base for this narrative. The freedom fight type of traditionalising narrative has also been supported by the Trianon trauma of dismembering Greater Hungary after the WWI and by the Yalta “treason” of Western powers after WWII.

⁴ The parallel between the Polish and Hungarian developments has been quite clear from the common populist heritage (see Kucharczyk and Wysocka, 2008 and Uitz, 2008) and recent practice of governments (Mudde, 2014, Muiznieks, 2014, 2016). See also the latest Fidesz party program (2010) with the key populist terms as work, home and family. The historical trajectory of Poland and Hungary from the trendsetter to illiberal democracy has been analysed by Rupnik (2007a,b and 2012). In the recent EPC analysis (2016) the Polish and Hungarian governments are among the “Europe’s Troublemakers”.

This ideological construct has been the core of Fidesz political discourse and it has been repeated several times by Fidesz leaders. First of all it has been the key topic of Viktor Orbán in several speeches, above all on national holidays, as “the Hungarian journey back into past” (Helgesen, 2014). In the Fidesz nationalist-populist discourse Hungary lost its sovereignty in 1944 with the German occupation and the regained sovereignty came just in 2010 when the (second) Orbán government produced the new Constitution (Basic Law, 2011) and re-established the historical continuity (actually with the authoritarian Horthy regime). For this political history the epithet of “populism from above” can be applied, with many fairy tales for adults by the government, using the politics of historical memory as the self-justification of (authoritarian) political regimes.⁵

The deep crisis in Poland has come later, since it has been covered by the half-successes in the “old economy”, in the quantitative GDP based economic growth. In fact, the first crisis phenomena appeared in both cases of Poland and Hungary in the mid-2000s, i.e. before the global crisis, but their outbreak was delayed with a short and weak political stabilization in Hungary until 2010 and in Poland until 2015. In the mid-2010s when the deep crisis has arrived it has shown the same features in both countries and it has been expressed in the same traditionalising narratives.

The Orbán model of velvet dictatorship is a real threat to all ECE countries, including Poland that has been reinforced by the mutual support of the two governments. Due to the spreading “Hungarian disease”, the real questions in all ECE countries are the following: (1) why these countries were so vulnerable to the global crisis since the late 2000s, (2) which are the factors responsible for negative domestic crisis reactions in the 2010s, (3) how it is possible that the current refugee crisis has strengthened the rule of velvet dictatorships claiming to provide self-defence for their countries against the “new invasion”?

First, the socio-economic and political decline took place already in the early 2000s, before the global crisis. The ECE countries were not able to switch from the old economy to the new economy (Aniol, 2015; Galgóczi, 2016) and therefore since the 2000s they have been losing global competitiveness (WEF, 2015). Some countries like Poland and Slovakia continued to advance in the old economy in GDP terms but like the other ECE countries they made no turn towards the innovation and human investment based new economy. Second, by the mid-2010s after the socio-economic

⁵ The best illustration of the Hungarian traditionalising narrative would be the analysis of Orbán speeches, but there is no space for discussing this huge literature (see e.g. Benner and Reinicke, 2014; Bouillette, 2014; Müller, 2015; Nowak, 2014; *The Economist*, 2014 and Orbán, 1999, 2011, 2012, 2014 a, b, 2015, 2016).

factors more and more the political factors have been responsible for the negative domestic crisis effects after the global crisis as both the decline of good governance and the low level of trust in the ECE political elites. Third, at the time of the refugee crisis there has been a deep identity crisis in ECE with the increasing Derex (Demand for Right-Wing Extremism) Index, especially in Poland and Hungary that has led to the increasing popular support for the Visegrad Four governments turning against the mainstream EU efforts of crisis management (Kucharczyk & Meseznikov, 2015).⁶

All in all, the defeat of modernization narrative has been caused by the deep dissatisfaction of the ECE populations with the Quarter-Century developments, namely by the failure of the catching up process in the first ten years of membership. Namely, Austria is a model case for Hungarians as the next door neighbour and developed Western EU member state. Nowadays, after 25 years of systemic change and 10 years of EU membership Austria is more ahead of Hungary in both socio-economic and political terms than before these changes. The key message in ECE was at the historical turning point of systemic change that the “democracy” would produce prosperity for all citizens, since democracy has always been understood by the ECE populations first of all as “welfare”. At present, after the Quarter-Century, both genuine democracy and welfare are missing in ECE, and there has been “desecuritisation” as a loss of social and job security. In this Age of Uncertainty, democracy has declined and instead of common welfare the ECE nations are split between the winners and losers.

Conclusion and discussion: the cultural war continues

Under the conditions of the EU membership the member state-specific narratives in ECE have shown high continuity and tenacity in content, but their scope and character has been transformed to a great extent. Because of the high complexity of the global effects, (1) there has been a widening cognitive dissonance in both competitive narratives, (2) the socio-political support of the narratives has been rearranged and (3) the dominant narrative has turned from the conceptual-ideological frame to a practical-political device of managing the “New Order”.

⁶ The Derex Index has been elaborated by the Political Capital Institute (<http://www.politicalcapital.hu/>). The latest summary of Derex Index has been given by Juhász and Molnár (2016) based on the latest European Social Survey data, indicating that out of 20 European countries after Portugal (13) Poland has the second highest Derex Index (11), while Hungary (10) and Slovenia (10) closely follow them. The increasing disenchantment, extremism, xenophobia and Euroscepticism in ECE can also be followed from the series of Pew Surveys (2009, 2014, 2016).

These issues give the outlines of further research, although some short explanations can be given as conclusions. First, although the traditionalising narrative has won the day after the global crisis and it has become the main conceptual frame for the majority of Poles and Hungarians, due to the effects of global crisis the cognitive dissonance of accepting contradictory statements has still become more widespread and it has characterised the both narratives. The most obvious case of accepting contradictory statements is the relationship of national and European identity in the Eurobarometer surveys. In the same way cognitive dissonance appears in the understanding the national versus the shared EU sovereignty, and/or the national traditions versus modernity in the popular thinking and public discourse. Accordingly, in the ruling circles of Fidesz the logical absurdity has become the everyday normality of communication as “double speech” switching between two contradictory statements regularly. It is the “peacock dance” (the term of Orbán), imitating pro-EU behaviour for the international public, and referring to the opposite for the domestic audience.

Second, the velvet dictatorships do not aiming at the convincing the majority, but mobilising the active, stubborn minority and silencing-pacifying the majority by forming a permissive consensus around the dominant narrative. It has a satisficing effect that the majority sees the core of this narrative at least as tolerable. The everyday official communication may contain many abrupt changes that has been bordering on absurdity, but beyond the true believers the large majority does not follow these zigzags and/or tolerates even extreme versions of the dominant discourse. An identity-based perspective is not expected to account well for short run shifts in policy views and actions, since the main narrative-based nation-state identities are only gradually subject to change.

Third, the main narratives shape not only the ideological frame of interpreting the entire world as a world view, but also create the power technology of the regimes to exercise political power by forming the attitudes of everyday people, their behavioural patterns obeying this power. The traditionalising narrative can be described in the terms of political culture as the victory of “subject” type of political culture’s patterns over the slowly emerging “citizen” type. Thus, it has led to a deep conflict with the rules and values of the EU, and the cultural war continues not only inside the ECE countries, but also between the EU institutions and the ECE populist governments.⁷

⁷ See currently EP, European Parliament (2016) or e.g. the comments of Szczerbiak, (2016).

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