

THE HOLLOWING OUT OF DEMOCRACY: HUNGARY AND BEYOND

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQeJm6m2QM0>



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When I was studying communist societies back in the '70s-'80s, there was a wealth of literature, and you could read about the differences between the Soviet-system, what Ceaușescu had in Romania, what Kádár was doing in Hungary, what the new communist systems, such as Ethiopia or Nicaragua. You were able to find even in journalistic or in scholarly accounts, that explained how they achieved power, how they maintained power, how they went on about destroying the institutions that might be able for an alternative, democratic system. Since the end of communism, you had much less this kind of literature that describes the new systems, that are emerging now. Authoritarian, quasi-authoritarian, how you want to describe them, if you want to know, what is going on in Turkey with Erdogan, or in Korea. What ever difference in quasi-authoritarian are bubbling up, there is a lack of that kind of literature and analysis. For that reason to begin with I found that Bálint Magyar's book made a contribution, that can lead us towards to understand the really most interesting and in some ways dangerous systems that come up. I say that because what we have in Hungary is a post-communist country, in a member state of the European Union, a country that in the Freedom House rankings scored across the board a high democracy scores throughout the first two decades. And that country now has been almost turned on its head, so you have a government without having to create political prisoners, without having to do the sorts of actions that are going to bring the condemnation the international community on your head, that managed to create a system of almost a total political control and to do so in such a way the ability of control political affairs in Hungary are looks like that it could last for many years to come. And in able to that within a democratic environment in the heart of Europe it is something very unique and explaining what Orbán has done I think Bálint Magyar has done a major service to understanding, not just what is going in Hungary now, and what is the kind of the new authoritarian systems which are popping up in different part of the world.

One thing stroked me when I was reading Bálint's book. Before I started doing what I doing now I was a newspaper reporter. One place I used to work was in a county in New Jersey, which was one of the most corrupt counties in the United States. When I worked there the old political machine was in still in political power. As I was reading Bálint's book I was saying to myself it is a little bit like the county in New Jersey. You had a boss, and everybody knew that he

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was the boss, he might have been the major, or might not even had an elected office, but he was the boss. And you had his underlings: the city council men, and there were the appointed officials. You might call it civil service. They were regarded as jobs for the boys. The people who supported the machine, who gave contributions to the machine, who would work for the machine in the election day, they did municipal jobs. When came time of contracts that municipality had over, there were certain formalities you had go through, certain bidding processes, but there was always one loyal to local constrictions firms or other kind of businesses, that were always rewarded with a contract. And there was an opposition too. But the opposition knew that it was defeated and didn't even tried hard, and to be perfectly honest it is like a little bit the Hungarian opposition today, so there were many similarities, but there were two major differences. One was that the case of the New Jersey county there was always the possibility that the federal authorities or the State of New Jersey authority would intervene, investigate and people would go to jail, and this happened to time to time and you had new people going in the machine, but there was always that possibility that you had to consider. The other difference is this: Viktor Orbán and Fidesz are much better to bring together a political machine than the bosses in the New Jersey county or in other municipalities in the United States. Much more thorough, much more comprehensive, much more far-reaching in the impact on ordinary people in the society, have had a much greater impact on the property relation and economy of Hungary than the boss had in Jersey city. What I want to say is what impresses me this is just like a very corrupt political machine except it has done much better.

We have several reports that look at the countries of Central-Europe. We also have Nations in transit. Nations in transit is a report we have been doing since 1994, it looks specifically to the post-communist world, the Baltics, the Balkans, Central-Europe and Eurasia. The next edition of the Nation in transit will be released in a month. I want to give you a preview that I would prefer if you note tweet. In most recent years, the Nation in transit focused on Russia and Eurasia. What was going on Belarus, Kazakhstan, the terrible things that happened one year to the next. This year the focus on Central-Europe and on the Balkans. In both regions number of countries have registered declines, number of countries have seen an increase in Russian influence, and we made connection the Russian influence and certain elements in political life which are unhealthy for democracy. We could see the beginnings of the decline of certain democratic institutions, especially in freedom of the press. So what was Viktor Orbán and Fidesz in Hungary, what is going on in Serbia, Macedonia, and Poland today is not entirely clear. What makes these results even more unusual and disturbing are not only that the countries

are showing declines, those countries which are in line for membership in the European Union, and in the past the countries that were in post membership phase of the EU usually made extra attempts to obey the rules, at least give some kind of anti-corruption effort, to freedom of press and to other civil liberties, and so on and so for. Now we can see a step away from them, I think that is says something about the dynamics of what is going on in the region, between Russia and a country like Hungary, its example the evident witness of the EU and its institutions.

I think there is always pushback possibilities, but I am not sure whether the democratic opposition in Hungary right now is up to the task. My colleagues at Freedom House have met with people from the NGO sector. In most countries people from NGO sector are a little more optimistic and energetic, have a little more fight in them, than people from traditional political parties. We found that the Hungarian NGOs – at least that we talked to – basically had a defeated attitude about being able to do anything against Orbán. I can certainly more understand why they do have this attitude after having read Bálint's book, because one of the feelings which emerges is the comprehensive nature is the Fidesz changes in society, how they reaches every layers and makes opposition economically intolerable for the people in Hungary. But I would simply add that we have seen major changes in the past 3-4 months in on part of the world which seemed to be in the track towards wrong direction, that is Latin-America. There was election results in Venezuela going against the Chavezta-movement, we also saw a the machine broke down in Argentina, and we now see a referendum in Bolivia, where Morales lost his ruling for life. Our feeling at Freedom House if you have the possibility of a democratic election, there is still exist a measure of hope. In a country like Russia, where the elections have been raped either through ballot box traffic and all traditional methods, or all the other techniques that Putin used that is one thing, but in other societies where quasi-authoritarian and authoritarian rulers taken over we have seen that the possibility of cheating with the ballot box, that is very important even in Hungary we have still opportunity, so I think that there should be more optimistic effort to build an unified opposition, than that is today.

I suspect that Bálint would put Hungary to partly-free category or worse, look, we have to go via methodology that we have Freedom in the world. One of the things that I want emphasize after having read Bálint's book is that the freedom in the world methodology does not capture adequately the methods of control, and methods of power acquisition that Orbán has used to gain hegemony in Hungary. Our methodology looks at you know freedom of the press, it looks that whether NGO have the ability to do their things without being over-regulated by the state. We look the aspects of the rule of law. And you know this is the part of Orbán

genius that he goes just so far in his efforts to splash the political opposition and to gain control over Hungary. In Hungary today you have a media that is much less acquired even either by the state or by cronies of the leadership. But there is some diversity in the Hungarian media. You have the most popular television channel that is critical the current government. So there is a major diversity almost everyone of the institutions and that is difficult to measure at what point it tips over to absolute or quasi-authoritarian dictatorship. But I would add that I don't think our methodology captures the ability of leaders like Orbán to gain control over the dimensions of the economy through techniques that are legalistic, use the law in certain ways, they are not the usual techniques of communist who just come in and nationalize everything, the Fidesz have been very skillful in the way it gained control the economy and that fact alone comes a long way in explaining why Orbán has gained such concentrated control over Hungary today.

Just clarify Hungary's status in Freedom House's reports. In Freedom of the press, which is an annual report that looks at globally the press freedom around the world Hungary had a score 23 on a 1-100 scale in 2009, what is basically on the same scale with the countries of the Western-Europe, and Czech Republic. Hungary now has a score of 40 and ranked in not a free, but a partly free. In Nation in transit Hungary has suffered the greatest decline of the any of the 29 countries that we asses, and Hungary has moved from the top rankings of the countries to a somewhat lower level, that puts it on the same category with the number of the Balkan states. It is true, that in Freedom of the world Hungary is still ranked as a free country. We have a methodology, but I would say that we have zero in Hungary as a country that has been especially concerning at Freedom House for the direction of its democracy. I would add that we have been visited by diplomats form Hungary. I have participated in 5 meetings two with ambassadors, the current and the previous ambassador, 2 meetings with other diplomats and 1 very entertaining go around with Zoltán Kovács.