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Interview

“Two decades were not enough to cement democratic principles”

Dániel Bartha on democratic regression in Hungary, the illiberal drift of East-Central Europe, and the chances for rapprochement

Hungary was the first among other states in East-Central and South-eastern Europe in a now familiar pattern: Democratic institutions are left in place, but they are weakened, modified or captured to such an extent that they differ decidedly from those in Western Europe. Is the normative consensus across regions in Europe eroding?

Following EU accession, the long-term vision and common political goals shared by all democratic parties were fading. The promises of a rapid catch-up made by Hungarian and European politicians were proven false, a fact exacerbated by economic crisis. A focus on economic well-being re-emerged as political and democratic rights become secondary concerns among citizens. Two decades of transformation were enough to introduce new institutions and to create a complex and functioning legal system, but not enough to transform society and cement democratic principles.

The process started well before 2010, when the Fidesz government won by a two-thirds majority. But only this majority ushered in the opportunity to change basic laws and place political appointees in key positions. Currently, there is no consensus on what constitutes an illiberal democracy. In fact, I don't believe it's an ideology, but rather a form of governing. Such unlimited political power and type of governance can be attractive to electorates in different political settings.

The 2018 BTI country report observes “the constant narrowing of civil space and the anti-Western orientation” that draws on the government’s “national collectivist” ideology. Would you agree with such assessments?

I think the situation is much more complex than that. Civil society in Hungary is less developed than is the case in many other post-socialist countries. There are several reasons for this, but probably one of the most relevant is the fact that Hungary's transition was a negotiated process involving the active participation of fewer people.

This means that only a small but professional civil society based on liberal principles was developed. Obviously, the Fidesz government cut off these organizations' funding sources, many of which are foreign or derive from George Soros' Open Society Foundation. Given the weak and fragmented nature of opposition parties, this well-organized but small core of civil society groups were the only stakeholders able to reveal corruption and build up cases against the government. This, of course, made them an obvious target. But the anti-Western orientation is not a given. Most members of the government remain well aware of the economic and political need to look to the West. Unfortunately, Hungary's foreign policy doesn't

reflect much in terms of moral considerations or democratic and human rights concerns. Instead, business interests are the most important factor.

The Orbán government has successfully consolidated its “cultural counter-revolution” and is continuing its “anti-establishment” approach. Do most Hungarians unequivocally back this agenda, or do they lack convincing alternatives?

The opposition is fragmented, and most of the opposition parties are highly unprofessional. Official party financing is simply not sufficient to economically sustain these parties. Although opinion polls suggest that a majority of Hungarians support the government, the truth is that most voters would like to see a change in government and more than 40% of them are undecided. This is why Fidesz still does not feel secure about the upcoming 2018 elections.

Hungary has had several conflicts with EU institutions in recent years. Does this signal a subregional drift away from the EU? Looking forward, what constructive role can Hungary and other V4 countries play in the EU?

I don't think the situation is hopeless and that it is primarily a matter of rhetoric – which can be quickly adapted. The V4 is a continually weakening regional format that won't play a major role within the EU in the upcoming years. Slovakia and the Czech Republic are already much closer to the EU mainstream. However, many points of criticism coming from Poland and Hungary should be discussed further, because attributing these things to Orbán and Kaczynski alone won't lead to a workable solution. A closer look at current EU proposals for migration policy shows that they contain a number of elements originally proposed by Orbán.

The specific East-Central European experiences of dual transformation and regional integration were believed to serve as helpful examples for other countries in transformation processes. From today's perspective, what can be learned from Hungary and Poland?

During my seven years working at a Hungarian organization specialized in transferring the experiences of democratic transformation to other contexts, we always emphasized the means, not the end. The real know-how derives from the “how to” of transformation and, even more importantly, understanding the mistakes made. Knowledge regarding potential pitfalls and mistakes is still very relevant, but I cannot criticize Poland and Hungary too harshly. Even the most critical experts have to admit that in some areas, such as public administration reforms, transformation has been effective.