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DEMOCRATIC (DE)CONSOLIDATION IN HUNGARY?

Today, coming from Hungary and participating at a conference on democratic transition, makes the life of a political scientist rather difficult. International press reports suggest that something has gone wrong in Hungary after the 2010 election. Our country allegedly left the way Central European countries took after the transformation process and took the way to a semi-authoritarian regime á lá Putin. As always, press reports exaggerate and simplify the political developments in Hungary - I think many of you are aware of these exaggerations.

Nevertheless, the question remains: What has happened to the Hungarian democracy? Has the process of democratic consolidation failed? Is it a consolidated or rather a simulated democracy? Is it a managed democracy or does it embody a new type of leadership democracy? Of course, I cannot give you a deep analysis of these questions in this place thus I will focus only on this one: has the Hungarian democracy been consolidated or deconsolidated during the last 25 years?

I will try to answer this question in my presentation.

Theoretical background

Let's start with the term democratic consolidation. By using this term I will follow the British political scientist Geoffrey Pridham and the German expert Wolfgang Merkel. Pridham writes: "Democratic consolidation is a process that diminishes the probability of reversal of democratization" (Pridham 1995:168). It is obvious that the term "consolidation" is not equivalent to the term "democratization". Consolidation is rather something which might be described as a set of "structural constraints and conditions" which prevents the reversal of democratization. Building up and consolidating a democracy is impossible if there are significant political actors who oppose the democratic system. Thus the absence or insignificance of anti-system actors will be the key point of a democratic consolidation process. Anti-system actors will destroy the democracy, thus they are anti-democratic at the same time.

Now, Merkel differentiates four levels of democratic consolidation. The first step of consolidation process pertains to the *absence* of frequent constitutional/institutional changes (*polity level*). The second level of consolidation is characterized by the *absence* or insignificance of *anti-system politicians (political representatives)*. For the third level is essential the *absence* of *anti-system actors* among the *powerful informal elite* (like: armed forces; oligarchies; business man; powerful economic actors). A system is *negatively consolidated* when the criteria of these three levels are fulfilled. For the fourth step, i.e. for the *positive consolidation*, the absence or insignificance of *anti-*

system attitudes among the citizens is required. A system has reached the phase of positive consolidation when the overwhelming majority of the citizens doesn't challenge the legitimacy of the democratic system. By contrast, we could talk about *deconsolidation* when anti-system attitudes and anti-democratic actors arise once again after a shorter or longer phase of consolidation.

Now the question is whether this theory is really applicable to the Hungarian case? I think here we have to realize that the democratic consolidation process in Hungary has some peculiarities which induce us to reconsider or refine this theory. Let's turn to these peculiarities.

Peculiarities of the Hungarian anti-system mentality

The *first peculiarity* of the democratic consolidation in Hungary after 1990 might be grasped by the simultaneous *presence of anti-system parties* and the *absence of anti-democratic parties* and political actors. Hungarian opposition parties have never used anti-democratic rhetoric, they have never tried to destroy democracy. Quite in contrary: they claimed to be the real defenders of democracy. It is always the opposition which accuses the government of being anti-democratic thus for the opposition nothing else has been left just the position of system opposition. The strategy of the opposition parties and movements has been adapted to this situation: delegitimizing the government not only by challenging *policy issues* but also accusing it for destroying the structure of the *polity*, that is democracy.

Now we have to stop here for a moment. In case of a deeply divided and polarized political life like the Hungarian one, where parties and their supporters consider their adversaries not as adversaries but rather as enemies, you might expect that opposition parties will act on every level of politics as *anti-system parties*. The *second peculiarity* of the Hungarian democratic consolidation is, however, that there is a huge discrepancy between the level of political rhetoric and political conduct as showed in parliamentary voting behaviour for example. Surprisingly enough on the level of voting behaviour there is no sign of this massive antagonism and polarization (at least until 2009). The Hungarian democracy has shown even some elements of the consensual democracy if you analyse only the voting behaviour of the parties. Considering the hostility among the two major political camps it is more than astonishing that 60-65 % of the bills on average have been adopted jointly by the governing parties and the main opposition parties in greatest unanimity! International agreements and the organic laws, which require a 2/3 majority, have been excluded from the scope of this research. Thus the bills adopted in harmony have concerned major policy issues!

Considering this data you could argue that the Hungarian democracy is quite close to the consensual democracy if you look at the level of political behaviour and not on the institutional level. The frequency of surplus majority in parliamentary voting and the affirmative voting behaviour of the opposition parties suggest that the Hungarian democracy is dominated rather by concordance than by antagonistic hostility.

Applying the theory

Considering this discrepancy between political rhetoric and voting behaviour one should perhaps refine the theory of consolidation presented by Pridham and Merkel.

As for the first level, institutional consolidation has always been a main characteristic of the Hungarian democracy; even the new constitution, adopted in 2011, has not changed radically the institutional structure of the Hungarian democracy. Regarding the second level of democratic consolidation, however, you should make two distinct sub-categories in order to be able to classify the democratic consolidation in Hungary: the behavioural level and the rhetorical level. As for the political behaviour of the political elite, measured here by voting behaviour, we could argue that the consolidation process took place as usual, we could even talk about a consensual democracy. By contrast, the level of political rhetoric has always showed elements of deconsolidation which had occasionally a back-lash on the level of political behaviour on the one hand, and had an even more serious consequence on the level of political attitudes of the citizens, on the other hand. Such a consequence is the political polarization and deep division within the Hungarian society. This led to a strange situation: while on the third level of consolidation process there are no influential or powerful informal actors (like armed forces, oligarchies or business man, major land owners) which would oppose the political system, the anti-system mentality is quite dominant on the level of the citizens. Once again: this anti-system mentality has never been overlapping with the anti-democratic mentality. Respective opposition parties and their supporters have always struggled for the democracy and against the anti-democratic government.

Reasons of the dominance of anti-system attitudes

What kind of reasons lie behind this peculiar anti-system but pro-democratic mentality and rhetoric of the respective opposition? Since I cannot give you all the reasons in this place I would like only to highlight the historical precedencies of this anti-system mentality. So, let's turn to these precedencies.

Historical precedence

(1) *Ius resistendi*, the right to resist the rulers has a long-standing tradition in Hungary. The right of resistance has been a recurrent issue of the debates on coronation oaths from the late 17th century until the First World War. The central point of these discussions has always been clause 31 of the Hungarian Magna Charta (called Golden Bull), which has already included the right of resistance as early as the 13th century. Although this provision has been challenged by the monarch from time to time, it was explicitly repealed only in 1687. The practice of the *ius resistendi*, however, could not be simply defeated by a repeal. Each time a Habsburg monarch has been crowned from the late 17th century the

coronation oath has explicitly excluded this clause of right of resistance again and again. László Péter, a famous expert of the Hungarian history, argues as follows:

“The fact that a statement formally referring to the abolition of the *ius resistendi* by statute remained a permanent feature of the investiture in the royal office until the very end of the Habsburg Monarchy, may already suggest that the issue of resistance retained political significance (even) after 1687. (...) The *ius resistendi* had to be expressly declared abolished in the royal oath because only the statute (...) had abolished it - custom had not. In the Hungarian system custom could always rescind statute (*desuetudo*) and in the oath the king vowed to maintain intact the custom of the country (Land).” (Péteri Hungary’s long 19th cent pp.122).

Considering this dominance of custom over written bills we have to pay attention not only to the decades of the Hungarian freedom fights from the late 17th century to the mid-19th century. This period gives us clear examples of anti-system opposition but seems to be perhaps more trivial because the aim of these fights was the restoration of the absolute independence of Hungary. Thus opposing a system meant even by the mid-19th century fighting for an independent Hungary.

Even the famous Austro-Hungarian compromise in 1867 could not transform totally this mentality of anti-system opposition. The biggest opposition party, the Independence Party has struggled for the independence of Hungary even after this compromise: they wanted to change not only the government but the whole political system of Hungary. And this tradition and mentality of anti-system opposition persisted even in the inter-war period, when the social democrats became a semi-legal opposition of the semi-parliamentary system - not to mention the anti-communist movements after the Second World War. Thus historical tradition must have played a key role in formation of anti-system mentality after the democratization process in 1990.

(2) Additionally there is perhaps one more special Hungarian characteristics of anti-system opposition. I would argue that the massive social support of anti-system parties is a distinctive feature of the anti-system opposition mentality in Hungary. Anti-system opposition in Hungary has never been an issue of peripheral or marginal parties and social groups. Key political actors and figures with considerable social support resisted always the system and not only the government of Hungary.

Is it really system opposition?

(3) One more remark: my hypothesis is that anti-system mentality in Hungary has been only a delegitimizing strategy without the explicit pretension to transform the whole political system. I presume that term “system” refers in Hungarian context neither to a certain type of political regime, nor to an economic or social system, but to a symbolic dimension of a political and socio-economic

system. The struggle for another system is performed on the symbolical level of a constitution and not on the material level. Whether this argument is only a hypothesis or more than an intuitive assumption this should be the topic of my next research project.