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Frivolous cohabitation. Preparing the soil for a *Jobbik* takeover?

János Mátyás Kovács, a Hungarian economist, talks to Karolina Wigura about deep sources of Jobbik's popularity and longue durée consequences of Victor Orban's legal carpet bombing.

Karolina Wigura: Popularity of the extreme right in Europe in the past few years has often been explained by the influence of the financial crisis from 2008. As an economist, do you think this is also the case with Hungary? And is the success of Hungarian radical right surprising to you?

János Mátyás Kovács: To tell the truth, I find *Jobbik's program* primitive and terribly boring. It recombines traditional motives of national socialism such as protectionism, egalitarianism, romantic anti-capitalism, state interventionism and the like, and complements these with hate speech with regard to communists, the EU, Jewish capital, the transnational companies, etc. In the mid-nineties, I published a paper on what I called „postmodern populism“ to compare new political strategies in Austria and Hungary but at that time even in my worst dreams I would not have thought that I would ever be confronted with the question of „national radicalism“ as *Jobbik* loves to designate its political course euphemistically. As to the future of Hungarian politics, I was prepared for a kind of soft nationalism with suppressed passions, coded racist discourse, and a few ridiculous neo-nazi groups. In other words, I was prepared, naively enough, for laughter rather than angst and contempt. Today, watching the Hungarian Guard march in the streets, listening to a *Jobbik* MP who demands conscription of Jews, or opening the newspaper in the fear of seeing just another photo of a murdered Roma child – I think all these badly need explanation that goes beyond repeating truisms on the lack of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or the sad repercussions of the global economic crisis. At any rate, there are hardly any societies in Eastern Europe suffering from the crisis to a similar extent which have to face as well-established nazis as we do. I must admit that I am also fed up with the repeated charges leveled at the „neoliberals“ who allegedly unleashed the markets during the past two decades, causing unbearable inequalities, in particular in northeastern Hungary, a rust belt zone populated by starving poor, most of them Roma.

Let's go back for a while to what you said about the boredom of Jobbik's program. How is it possible that a party whose program is so completely uninteresting, is so catchy for voters?

When I say that the Hungarian extreme right is boring, I do not only think of its economic messages but also of the political techniques of mobilization and indoctrination as applied by *Jobbik* and dozens of its fellow-traveler groups, some of them bordering on terrorism. Boredom does not mean that you would not burst out in anger and disgust in facing the physical or verbal aggression performed by their followers (for instance, seeing those football hooligans who stormed a lecture hall at one university in Budapest the other day, yelling at the striking students: „we wish you will die of hunger washing dishes in a McDonald's restaurant in London“). Nevertheless, the large-scale use of the Internet for political propaganda, cherishing of the „national rock“ culture, wide-range paramilitary education and organization, ethnic scapegoating, anti-corruption campaigns, pro-Iranian attitudes, and above all the trivial fact that as far as its economic demands are concerned, the extreme right is actually arch-leftist – these are no *differentia specifca* of the Hungarian neo-nazis however successful they may be. Without trying to deny the policy errors made by the socialist-liberal governments between 2002 and 2010, I am sure *Jobbik* would not have been able to survive if *Fidesz* had not followed its first steps with “careful love” as Viktor Orban put it.

Agnieszka Pasieka in her commentary for “Kultura Liberalna” also claims that the content promoted by the extreme right as well as its mobilizing strategies are, in fact, unimaginative and similar everywhere. Doesn't the growing popularity of extreme groups result rather from weaknesses of the political center. This seems to be true at least in Poland. But returning to the Hungarian extreme right – is there nothing particularly typical for it?

Of course, I could indulge in details of cultural anthropology to demonstrate the uniqueness of *Jobbik*, and entertain you with examples reflecting a strange – in a sense, really postmodern – blend of Facebook culture with old Hungarian shamanism, 19th century-style blood libels against Jews and the revival of the cult of admiral Horthy. However, I would rather say something more about a peculiar symbiosis of the right and the extreme right in Hungary – a frivolous cohabitation that probably makes the whole issue much less boring, especially for the Polish audience. Nonetheless, you are right: whenever the extremes start flourishing, it's reasonable to assume that the centre had dried up previously.

Some commentators warned the Poles, though, that Jarosław Kaczyński's success in the next parliament elections could bring Victor Orban's style of rule to Poland...

I don't know enough about PiS to compare it to *Fidesz*, and there may be as many similarities between them as there are differences. . Nevertheless, I would like to shed some light on a potential asymmetry. I suppose Jarosław Kaczyński does not want to sell himself by conveying the image of a Tusk-like conservative liberal whereas that is exactly what Orban is doing. He uses

the “radicals” to situate himself as a moderate, who is the sole guarantee for saving the country (and Europe) from a new Hungarian national socialism. Meanwhile, *Jobbik* actually works as a faction of *Fidesz* – more outspoken, vocal, action-oriented and violent than the ruling party. They cooperate in local governments smoothly, though do not cease to fish for each other’s voters: when *Fidesz* takes some pragmatic steps (for example, to calm down Western criticism), *Jobbik* expands a little, oscillating between 10 and 20 per cent in the opinion polls, and vice versa. The boundaries between them are fuzzy. Despite occasional conflicts in legislation, the leaders of *Jobbik* are happy to see *Fidesz* implement deep-going social changes, some of which they did not even dare to speak of before. No doubt about it, they could also be jealous of Orban who has stolen their show during the past three years but I guess they know that in the long run he works for them by willy-nilly preparing the soil for a *Jobbik-Fidesz* coalition or – *horribile dictu* – a *Jobbik* takeover.

In my view the increase in popularity of the Polish extreme right is rather a sign of Kaczyński’s failure to attract the right-wing, but undecided voters with his center-right party. Law and Justice, focused on the Smolensk airplane crash, no longer appears to be a party dealing with Poles’ everyday problems. If more and more voters seem convinced by the extreme right organizations, this might have fatal consequences for Polish democracy. Nonetheless, at the moment it is difficult to imagine PiS collaborating with the radicals from ONR (*National Radical Camp*). But coming back to Orban: how far to the right do you think he might move, trying, as you put it, to steal *Jobbik*’s show?

For the time being, Orban is not a neo-nazi (but he can turn his coat rather quickly: you may remember that he was not yet a national-conservative autocrat in the early 1990s), and one hopes he will not become one soon. However, he did his best to shatter essential pillars of the rule of law, bringing parliamentary democracy to the verge of dictatorship. He seems to be convinced that *Fidesz* will be able to control that “liminal game” for good, without applying Putinist methods like having the political rivals arrested or journalists killed. Also, he may be proud of avoiding so far to obey his “radical” colleagues who demand among other things that the government should terminate international debt payments or resettle the Roma in well-guarded reservations.

You have mentioned that Hungarian society undergoes a fundamental social change. What do you mean by this?

I do not only mean his new constitution that did away with many of the former checks and balances, the new electoral law that abolished the level playing field for the parties, or the new media law that ensures citizens remain ignorant about the dismantling of liberal democracy. These are all well-known facts, I believe, for the interested public outside Hungary. Less well known is, however, how this legal carpet bombing is supplemented with everyday policies that range from flirting with a secession from the EU, waging a “war of freedom” against foreign capital and fraternizing with

authoritarian powers in Asia and the Middle-East (to catch the “Eastern wind” as Orban says), through renationalizing important industries and centralizing public administration, education and health care, all the way down to drastically reducing welfare services for the poor and forcing them to do public work for peanuts. Cutting the budgets of cultural institutions, a decision that annoys us, intellectuals so much, is just the whipped cream on the top of the cake, as we say in Hungarian.

Orban might still lose the next parliamentary elections to a rational center-oriented opposition, though...

What is certainly unknown even to us, insiders, I am afraid, are those millions of micro-changes in culture which have taken place in the deeper layers of the Hungarian society in the course of the “revolution” as Orban decided to name the origin of his regime. Constitutional *bricolage*, nationalization and centralization can be stopped or even reversed, budgets can be reshaped if *Fidesz* loses the elections next year. Yes, his own oligarchs and political appointees such as the president, the chief justice and prosecutor, the head of the Constitutional Court, the governor of the National Bank, etc. will remain with us for long-long years, making post-Orban Hungary a conflict-ridden country. But will we arrive in a post-Orban world soon? The cultural change that preceded the victory of *Fidesz* in 2010 and contributed to its two-third majority in the Parliament has been carefully reinforced and broadened over the last three years.

I would like to ask you now about the deep sources of popularity of the extreme right in Hungary. Would you point to fascist sympathies from the past, that have not been worked through enough or to love of authoritarian regime? Or maybe Hungarians have never had the opportunity to learn to believe in democracy?

The moderately anti-liberal, euroskeptic and racist attitudes of Hungarians who had been relatively tolerant of corruption, rule-bending and the like were offered a new Social Contract combining – to put it simply – Janos Kadar with Miklos Horthy. According to it, in a disintegrating Europe and in the global mood of challenging liberal values, the nation needs a strong paternalist leader providing citizens with supreme goods such as security, order, decent living standards and national pride in exchange of not disturbing him in looking after his people. Thus far, Orban has been successful in providing only one of these goods by strengthening national (more exactly, nationalist) identity with the help of provoking the neighboring countries by giving citizenship to the Hungarians who live there, and inventing concepts like “strong Hungary” as a “world nation”. However, besides the impact of symbolic cohesion and catchy phrases, I would not underestimate the adverse consequences of revitalizing primordial values and communist coping strategies as well as of the new opportunities given by the *Fidesz* regime to “well-behaving” younger professionals. I am talking here about hundreds of thousands of people who, as reliable members of the new clientele, benefit from the ongoing change of the guard, I would rather call it cleansing, launched by the government in schools, hospitals, courts, city halls, state-

owned companies, theatres, the army and the police and whatnot. Orban is a master of coded racist and overt irredentist rhetoric as well as of law-and-order discourse and a kitschy historical interpretation of Hungarian Christianity.

Could you please describe the state of mind of people who agree for Orban's new social contract?

By adverse impacts I mean in the first place fear, opportunism, servile collaboration, apathy, helplessness, and all other *déjà vu* traits of Eastern European non-democratic societies. At the same time, this mentality may also give rise to a new radicalism engulfing *Fidesz* if it proves unable to provide the goods promised and sinks in its own corruption. Then, frustration might turn into violence, resentment and hatred against Orban who used these passions against socialists and liberals for a whole decade at least. It does not make a big difference whether that change will be orchestrated by *Jobbik*, a more extremist *Fidesz* or their future coalition. The cultural, discursive and political room for such maneuver is already there. Undoubtedly, *Jobbik* is extremely dangerous, although it could never have become so dangerous without the help of its Big Brother. What annoys me at present to a similar degree is that, irrespective of their victory or defeat in 2014, "Orbanistan" will certainly not become a country imbued with *kultura liberalna* soon. Of course, I would be most happy to see the failure of creeping nazification. But witnessing the socialist (moreover, pre-Blairist-style socialist) leanings of the majority of democratic opposition in my country, my happiness would not be unreserved.

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