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FIELD NOTE

The Decline of Democracy in East-Central Europe

Hungary as the Worst-Case Scenario

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All of the East-Central European countries have been diverging from the European Union (EU) mainstream in recent years, but Hungary most of all. This paper offers a country study of Hungary, focusing on both internal and external political transformations and on the “de-democratization” and “de-Europeanization” process as a serious divergence from mainstream EU developments due to the socio-economic and political crises of the past quarter-century. Hungary has become a “defective” or “Potemkin” democracy: since the 2010 elections the formal institutions of democracy have been nothing more than a façade for nondemocratic, authoritarian rule.

INTRODUCTION: THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY IN ECE AND HUNGARY AS THE “WORST CASE”

Discussion of the academic literature and its paradigmatic change on the subject of the decline of democracy in East-Central Europe (ECE) is facilitated by the fact that so many evaluations of the past quarter-century have been published recently. In their analysis of developments in scholarship on ECE in a special issue of *Europe-Asia Studies*, Ramona Coman and Luca Tomini conclude that the most important current theme is “How can we explain the democratic crises in the new member state of the EU” (Coman and Tomini 2014, 855). Regarding the general trend of democracy decline, Tomini notes that “the Orbán government in Hungary has attracted the attention of the other European countries and the European Union because of its authoritarian and majoritarian concept of democracy” accompanied by a “systematic destruction of checks and balances in the government” (Tomini 2014, 859; see also Coman and Tomini 2014, 855). Indeed, rejecting the idea of a “rapid democratic consolidation” in ECE since the 2000s (Merkel 2008), many scholars have focused recently on “re-evaluating the post-communist success story” and explaining the worst-case scenario in

Hungary (Herman 2015), which János Kornai has termed a “U-turn” (Kornai 2015).¹

In a recent paper Lise Herman pointed out that the minimalist definitions of democracy with a “procedural minimum” in the workings of the major formal institutions have a limited explanatory power. Supposedly, well-designed formal institutions provided a guarantee against the erosion of democracy in ECE, but in fact this thin democratic façade has not been effective in the absence of a vibrant civil society and deeply ingrained democratic norms (Herman 2015, 4, 9, 13). Western institutions have been transferred to ECE without their socio-cultural environments, that is, without the proper social embedment; hence sustainable democracies have not emerged in the ECE region. The deepening contrast between formal and informal institutionalization provides a key to understanding the failures of democratization and Europeanization, since the new democratic institutions have remained “empty shells without substance,” as Antoaneta Dimitrova explains it: “If formal and informal rules remain different and do not align, institutionalization will not take place” (Dimitrova, 2010, 138–39).²

For the ECE countries the EU accession process entailed institutional transfer from the EU, because establishing all EU *formal* institutions is a precondition for membership. This institutional transfer has created the formal institutions for competition in the emerging democracies, but this can only result in providing the opportunity for participation if the proper *informal*—mobilizing and protecting—“civil rights” institutions and

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patterns of civic political culture are created in the further EU adjustment process. This quarter-century has shown that the establishment of the formal institutions in ECE has been much easier than the creation of the corresponding supporting informal, civic institutions in the young democracies. In the nineties this democratization process had already produced a shocking asymmetry between the formal and informal institutions of the new democracies, and due to the lack of proper informal institutions, even the formal institutions eroded. Later, however, in the 2000s, the informal institutions developed a dual-face, with their weaker democratic and stronger autocratic varieties as some negative informal institutions, such as clientele-corruption networks, became established.

The controversial status of ECE democracy and the emergence of negative informal institutions has been deeply analyzed in a paper by Rupnik and Zielonka (2013) that overviews the history of democratization. They describe this conflict between the new external criteria for democracy and the internal decline of democracy in ECE by focusing on the conceptual frame of the negative informal institutions. Rupnik and Zielonka identify the particular ECE type of negative informal institutions that are detrimental to democracy as non-transparent clientele-corruption networks between politics and the economy. Their analysis deserves special attention because it goes beyond the narrow horizon of the formalist-minimalist definition of electoral democracy that was formulated in the spirit of the nineties. Their approach to negative informal institutions provides the proper conceptual tools to reveal today's façade democracy as the product of "democratic regression." Moreover, the overview of their comprehensive analysis can lead us beyond the well-known theory of state/agency capture and widen the picture on the decline of democracy by incorporating the main tendency toward oligarchization in ECE. The informal clientele networks have led to state capture by powerful joint political-business groups with a fusion between the economy and politics.

The point of departure in the analysis of Rupnik and Zielonka is that the ECE countries embarked on a democratic transition in the nineties and were considered as consolidated democracies in the 2000s when they joined the EU. But the pendulum has swung back in the opposite direction. After a quarter-century, these ECE countries have to be assessed as (semi-)authoritarian systems; they developed reform fatigue and were not ready for further political transformations. Consequently, they became vulnerable first to a populist turn and then to an authoritarian turn with the elitist, oligarchy-prone parties in their over-centralized states. This backsliding of democracy or "democratic regression" has come as a surprise for most analysts who defined democracy very narrowly, as just the establishment of the formal institutions in the young democracies. To date, "political scientists have devoted considerable attention to the study of formal institutions in the region such as parties, parliaments and courts. However, informal institutions and practices appear to be equally important in

shaping and in some cases eroding democracy, and we know little about them" (Rupnik and Zielonka 2013, 3). In fact, there has been more and more of a "gap between the institutional design and actual political practices" (ibid., 7). Hence, no sustainable democracy has emerged.

Thus, Rupnik and Zielonka put the contrast of formal and informal institutions at the center of their analysis of the reasons for the backsliding. They have pointed out the weakness of the earlier assessments by the simple fact that the political debates across the ECE region have missed "the role of informal politics in undermining formal laws and institutions"; the same formal democratic institutions "perform differently in different political cultures because of informal codes and habits" (ibid., 12). Rupnik and Zielonka have summarized the historical trajectory in ECE in such a way that, although the formal-legal constitutional order was put in place right after the systemic change, the state and its agencies were nevertheless captured by the oligarchs as rent-seeking actors using their informal networks. As a result, "Over years, students of Central and Eastern Europe have acquired a comprehensive set of data on formal laws and institutions, but their knowledge of informal rules, arrangements, and networks is rudimentary at best." The formalist-legalist approach is misleading, since "informal practices and structures are particularly potent in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe because of the relative weakness of formal practices. Informal practices and networks gain importance when the state is weak, political institutions are undeveloped, and the law is full of loopholes and contradictions. ... The rule of law is replaced by the rule of informal ad hoc arrangements orchestrated by people who have no accountability operating in a mode of dirty togetherness." Therefore, "cultural anthropologists are probably more suited than political scientists to study social networks" (ibid., 13, 14).

This general tendency leads again to the Hungarian worst-case scenario. As noted in the *Democracy Index 2014*: "Democracy has also been eroded across east-central Europe. ... [A]lthough formal democracy is in place in the region, much of the substance of democracy, including political culture based on trust, is absent" (EIU 2015, 22). Moreover, "Some negative trends have recently worsened. Hungary is perhaps the prime example among the EU's new member states in the region. Since winning a two-thirds parliamentary majority in the 2010 election, the centre-right Fidesz party has systematically taken over the country's previously independent institutions" (ibid., 22–23). In the regional overview of the Next Generation Democracy (NGD) prepared by the Bertelsmann Foundation (2015), Hungary has slid back to the twenty-sixth place out of the 28 EU member states in democratic institutional rankings, to the twenty-fourth place in inclusiveness (political and social integration), and to the twenty-seventh place in the management of policies (strategic capacity and consensus building). What is more, for consensus

building the score is very low—2 out of 10—the worst case in this NGD scoring. According to the NGD analysis, Hungary has developed in the last years “considerable democratic deficit ... Hungary thus represents the most troubling case” (Bertelsmann, 2015: 6, 9).³

THE “HUNGARIAN DISEASE” AS AN ANTI-DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGE TO THE EU

The proper treatment of democracy decline in ECE needs a new conceptual framework; previous analyses have been built on the evolutionary model, in which the ECE countries continue to develop toward Europeanization and democratization. In fact, in this model “the lack of the deep substance of democracy remains largely and voluntarily unobserved” (Papadopoulos 2013, 2). In recent years, however, the large international comparisons conducted by the leading ranking institutions (Bertelsmann Foundation, Freedom House, and World Economic Forum) have made it clear that the ECE countries have been diverging from the EU mainstream. Simply said, the “convergence dream” has failed (Darvas 2014). The same approach has appeared in international political science in evaluations of quarter-century developments or the ten years of membership.

The consolidation of democracies in ECE is no longer the issue; on the contrary, the conversation is about the deconsolidation process. After 25 years of democratization, the theoretical debates in the ECE literature have again been whirling around the definition of democracy. In the last years there has been a vivid debate about the conceptual framework and the proper terminology of this process. There has been an abundance of terms and theories about semi-democracies and hybrid democracies, competitive authoritarianism, or semi-authoritarian, patrimonial, or “crony capitalist” systems, and transitions to authoritarian rule (Cassani 2014; Kailitz 2013; Moeller and Skaaning 2013; Morlino 2012, Roberts 2009, and The Economist, 2014). This paper relies on this current literature for its conceptual framework, using basically the terms *democracy deficit* and *defective democracy* for these declining ECE democracies, drawing from the reports on the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI). The divergence from the EU mainstream has taken place in an accelerated way in the last decade, which has been a “lost decade” for ECE as a region in the European catching-up process in EU2020 terms (IMF 2014a,b). It is appropriate to use the metaphor that ECE politics has become a story of “crumbling sand castles,” built on shifting sands, that have finally collapsed. Here we discuss this process in terms of de-Europeanization and de-democratization, encompassing the decline of democracy and good governance as well as the worsening of global competitiveness.

The deep crisis of the party systems has been perhaps the most acute disease of ECE politics; the deepening de-

alignment between voters and parties may be conceptualized as the lack of participative or inclusive democracy. The ECE parties have been elitist, hovering over the society and producing only fragile governments with short life-spans (see e.g. Haughton 2014 and Pop-Eleches 2010). Paradoxically, the “orthodox,” mainstream ECE parties have been at the same time elitist and populist, as in the construct of “populism from above.” This phenomenon has been described in international political science as the tension between “responsive” and “responsible” parties and governments (see Bardi et al. 2014) and this model can also be applied to ECE developments. In the early stage of systemic change, in the nineties, there was a high expectation in the ECE societies for catching up with the West, first of all in terms of welfare, which the population tended to identify with democratization. The subsequent governments and governing parties have been very “responsive” to this mass demand, but they have not been “responsible” in the long-term strategic planning of the country’s future. This responsive, but irresponsible, behavior of parties and governments has generated a cumulative effect and resulted in deep popular dissatisfaction, the emptying of democracy, and the loss of credibility for parties, opening the way to an ECE type of Euroskepticism (Pew Survey 2014).

The ECE parties turned out to be predatory in privatization and public procurement, ineffective in government, and manipulative in the public media. Conversely, it is easy to argue that it was the worsening socio-economic processes that undermined the credibility of the first party systems by the early 2000s, a situation that has been aggravated by the effects of the global crisis. In such a way, the former mainstream parties lost their standing and the first ECE party systems collapsed in the critical elections of the 2000s (Róbert and Papp 2012). Second party systems have come into being in ECE, but the new governing parties likewise have been unable to change the course of the peripheralization of ECE in the EU. They have not lessened but rather have increased the “de-alignment” between the parties and the populations.

The special Hungarian case can only be analyzed against this general ECE background with its specific features. In this paper, the focus will be on political party developments during the period of Fidesz dominance in Hungary. The Hungarian case is an “ideal type,” or worst-case scenario, of the decline of democracy and the transition to an authoritarian system in ECE (see, e.g., Pappas 2014).

Actually, the young democracy in Hungary before 2010 was a “chaotic democracy,” with weakening formal institutions and strengthening informal political-business networks. The weak state was unable to cope with the parallel, complex, and multidimensional processes of systemic change, in which the economic, political, and social changes not only had very different time perspectives but also confronted each other. In a word, the deep and quick economic transformations of the transition from planned to

market economy produced huge social contradictions, with high unemployment and large social exclusions, and the weak democratic state was unable to control this social exclusion in a “responsible” way. People felt that all these changes took place above them and that they had to pay a high price for marketization and democratization. Without a participative democracy, the formal institutions were continually weakening, with the result that, by 2010, democracy was to a great extent emptied. Basically, people were disappointed with the whole period of the quarter-century and dissatisfied with a democracy that had brought impoverishment and insecurity for Hungarian society.⁴

The emptying of democracy by 2010 was the best background for the emerging Fidesz-world—that is, for the transition to the authoritarian rule. In the particular party developments in Hungary, the terms hegemonic party system or “central” party system without strong opposition parties, offer a good starting point for analysis. Fidesz had already become a major economic, social, and political actor in the 2000s, and by 2010 its political organization had embraced and colonized, step by step, a large part of the economic, social, political, and cultural sectors in Hungary. With its informal networks it penetrated into the entire society, including all sectors from the economy to the media (Bajomi-Lázár 2013), and accomplished a series of agency captures. Thus, by 2010 it was not (only) a political party but was a complex, all-embracing, and well-organized economic and social actor that was represented and organized by a hierarchically constructed political party and ruled by the personal leader from above.

The 2010 parliamentary election was a major turning point in Hungarian history. After a quarter-century of systemic change, the first party system collapsed and a second party system came to being. In the latest “critical elections,” in 2014, the Hungarian party landscape had drastically changed. Fidesz became the dominant party, having won 53.64 percent of votes and 263 (out of 386) seats in 2010, and 45.04 percent of votes and 123 (out of 199) seats in 2014. In both cases this has meant a two-thirds supermajority. The MSZP (or HSP, Hungarian Socialist Party) lost its leading position in 2010 (21.28 percent of votes and 59 seats) and the leftist parties running together received only 25.67 percent of votes and 29 seats in 2014. The extreme right Jobbik party managed for the first time to enter the parliament in 2010 (16.36 percent of votes and 47 seats) and it continued its strengthening in 2014 (20.3 percent of votes and 23 seats). Elections to the European Parliament have shown a similar trend: Fidesz received 56.36 and 51.49 percent of votes with 14 and 12 seats in 2009 and 2014 respectively; MSZP received 17.37 and 10.92 percent of votes with 4 and 2 seats; and Jobbik received 14.77 and 14.68 percent of votes with 3 and 3 seats.⁵

The emergence of the second party system was not just a routine, legal-formal change in the Hungarian party-political system with the usual change of governments. It was not a

simple “political event” in the narrow sense of the word, but in fact represented a complete, comprehensive change of the Hungarian political-legal and socio-economic systems. The former chaotic democracy with a weak state can be called a *deficit* democracy, but in 2010 Hungary began the transition to authoritarian rule and its political system was devolving into a *defective*, Potemkin democracy. The governing Fidesz, with its two-thirds supermajority, could change the entire political-legal system and establish a new kind of authoritarian system in which all changes were “legal” and seemingly “democratic.” In 2014, with the recent victories of the Fidesz in the parliamentary, European, and municipal elections, there was a new historical turning point to a system that this paper will try to conceptualize and analyze as an *electoral autocracy*.

In the second party system emerging after 2010, the Fidesz completed step by step the process of agency captures through state capture by an overwhelming government that monopolized all political power. The two-thirds supermajority enabled Fidesz to pass a new constitution and destroy the checks-and-balances system. The second Orbán government replaced the heads of the basic institutions with loyal Fidesz party soldiers. The main political weapon of the party was the legal instrumentalism of the state machinery, using the legal rules for direct political purposes, since the two-thirds majority was in fact a constitution-making majority; thereby, all the anti-democratic actions of the second Orbán government were strictly made “legal,” turning the rule of law into the “law of rule” or “rule by law.” The second Orbán government actually re-regulated all socio-economic and political fields, and with this comprehensive new legislation the democracy capture was accomplished. Hence, not only the Fidesz party but the political system as a whole—and even more, the entire Hungarian socio-economic system—has been regarded by the analysts as a Potemkin democracy (see Scheppele 2014). This process of converting all important democratic rules through legal means into an authoritarian political system may be termed “democracy capture” and it has produced a Potemkin façade democracy.⁶

The second Orbán government, in the first part of the legislative cycle (2010–2012), undertook complete overhaul of the political system into a hegemonic or “central” party system by marginalizing all political and social actors and conquering all the leading positions in the formally independent state institutions such as the Constitutional Court. Fidesz transformed the entire Hungarian legal structure in the period of the second Orbán government. It produced many more acts in this legislative period than usual (859 acts) that were amended very often (538 amendments), because there were many low-quality acts legally, and/or they were amended frequently and immediately due to new demands and changing circumstances. The second Orbán government also passed a new constitution—termed by Kim Scheppele (2013a) as an “unconstitutional constitution”—in

the spirit of legal traditionalism and a nineteenth-century type of nationalism, even including a reference to the crown of Saint Steven. By re-regulating the political system as a whole, in this legislative period the second Orbán government built a completely new democratic façade for an undemocratic system of institutions. On the surface, everything still looks democratic and legally well regulated, because a Potemkin façade covers the actual hegemonic one-party rule in this new kind of authoritarian system. It has basically changed Hungary's position in the world by sliding back from *deficit* to *defective* democracy in the international rankings. Moreover, it has been referred to in the international media as a "leader democracy," echoing Max Weber's term "Führerdemokratie."

This Potemkin democracy produced disastrous socio-economic consequences for Hungary, with a free-fall of its international competitiveness (WEF, 2014). The volatile economic policy of the second Orbán government aggravated the socio-economic crisis that in the last years had caused a mass migration to the West of half a million people, but during the legislative term it generated only soft protests and deep apathy at home. Thus, a very polarized, frustrated, and disillusioned society faced the domestic parliamentary and European parliamentary elections in 2014. The government concocted in the second half of its term a manipulative electoral law to craft a constitutional majority, again through seemingly "democratic" elections. These 2014 elections have produced fatal consequences for the Hungarian party-political system, and for Hungary in general, since these unfair, manipulated elections completed the transition to a higher level of authoritarian rule. Altogether, this decline of democracy in Hungary into "populism from above" has led toward a new kind of authoritarian system, an elected autocracy.

THE TURN TO ELECTED AUTOCRACY AFTER THE 2014 ELECTIONS IN HUNGARY

The second Orbán government, abusing its two-thirds majority, changed the rules of elections very often in its legislative period, even right before the 2014 parliamentary elections. As Scheppele noted about these manipulated, unfair elections, "Orbán's constitutional majority—which will allow him to govern without constraint—was made possible only by a series of legal changes unbecoming a proper democracy. ... Remove any one of them and the two-thirds crumbles." And she continued with a warning: "The European Union imagines itself as a club of democracies, but now must face the reality of a Potemkin democracy in its midst. EU is now going into its own parliamentary elections, after which it will have to decide whether Hungary still qualifies to be a member of the club" (Scheppele 2014, 17).⁷

With the 2014 elections Fidesz has further strengthened its dominant position in this second party system and the extreme Right has preserved its big parliamentary role, while the Left has been weakened and fragmented into small parties. The third Orbán government has also changed the structure of government and has endeavored to extend its rule over the entire Hungarian society. As to the government structure, a much bigger and more hierarchical and expensive government machinery entered into office on June 15, 2014. The super-ministries have even greater power concentration than they had in the already over-concentrated second Orbán government. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is not of the traditional type, managing the government; rather, a huge office directly serving the Prime Minister has been developed to control all walks of life. Instead of 132 "government leaders" as in the second Orbán government, there are already 198 in the third Orbán government and it is not yet the end of this transformation process. In the PMO under the direction of a new Minister of the PMO, János Lázár, three state secretaries and twenty-seven deputy state secretaries have been appointed so far.

There are two reasons for this growing number of high government officials. First, Fidesz has to reward its good servants with government positions, since in this cycle there are fewer members of parliament (MPs), so those former Fidesz MPs who could not re-enter the parliament are being compensated. Another 46 former Fidesz MPs have carried on as mayors and vice mayors, to keep them loyal and to indicate that Fidesz does not abandon anyone who has served loyally. Second, the role of government is expanding, and Fidesz needs people to cover the newly colonized social areas, to control everything from economy to civil society. The third Orbán government has not only extended its rule to all sectors of the new "party state," but has also been controlling more and more of the society as a whole. After 2014 it has increasingly exercised a "dictatorship over everyday life," with increasing penetration into the life-world of all citizens. It has built an extensive system of state corporatism through state-controlled organizations for all public employees, with mandatory memberships in professional corporations. In addition, the state-directed social movements have been organized into a large pseudo civil society organization, the Civic Unity Forum (CÖF). What is more, the list of churches has been reviewed by the Fidesz-controlled parliament, and the churches considered non-loyal to Fidesz have been deprived of their legal status. The worst still may be the new "cultural dictatorship," since the Orbán government has established the Hungarian Academy of the Artists (MMA) from its loyal supporters. The government has entrusted all decisions in the cultural sector to its leaders and has channeled all resources from the state for cultural life through the MMA.

In the second Orbán government, the Fidesz-associated oligarchs represented only a shadow oligarchization;

although these trusted allies actually controlled a large part of economy, this informal super-network of networks as the top organization of the oligarchs was not yet fully visible. EU transfers were used to build up clientele systems of friendly oligarchs who received most of the public procurement during the second Orbán government. However, in the third Orbán government the situation has changed rather radically in this respect, as the PMO under the leadership of János Lázár, representing the new power concentration efforts of Viktor Orbán, has tightened strict, direct state control over these Fidesz oligarchs. In a special kind of “hostile takeover,” it has introduced a (quasi) state-managed economy, not only with the renationalization of many multinationals, but also with direct political control over its own domestic “friendly clienteles,” in order to displace all competitive power centers. In general, the issue of oligarchs and oligarchization has risen high on the agenda of public debates and media in recent years in ECE, but in Hungary, because of this “war of oligarchs,” it has proven to be particularly important. In Hungary there has been a great deal of media material both on the oligarchization and on the recent power shift in the third Orbán government moving all powers to the PMO.⁸

Parallel with these political developments, the socio-economic situation has further worsened during the third Orbán government. By avoiding painful structural reforms with national consensus, the politics of Orbán has led to a significant confrontation with the masses who expected quick and easy miracles from Fidesz as it had promised. The political destabilization and permanent confrontation has also produced economic destabilization. A socio-economic vicious circle has started, and it cannot be stopped by a strong-handed government despite the self-reproducing nature of an electoral autocracy. The deepening socio-economic crisis and drastically declining international competitiveness of Hungary, even compared to other ECE states, has generated a deep domestic and international crisis in the era of the accelerated globalization. Orbán’s declaration of “illiberal democracy” (Orbán, 2014) has unleashed an international protest wave and has invited tough reactions by democratic governments worldwide.

Analysis of the Fidesz regime confirms that corrupt clientele networks have come to dominate in Hungary as negative informal institutions in the Potemkin democracy. This defective democracy has been based on fake political participation, the politics of historical memory, and the restriction of opposition from any formal role in the parliament. The present hegemonic party system of Fidesz represents a serious historical deviation from the mainstream European development that cannot be consolidated within the EU. This historical deviation, as a serious case of de-Europeanization and de-democratization along with national-social populism, has also meant constant EU confrontation—or as the Orbán government calls it, “a freedom fight against EU colonization.” It comes as no surprise that,

in international political science, more and more analysts have raised the issue of the confrontation of the incumbent Hungarian government with the EU membership: “As for Hungary, how much tolerance should Europe show towards the wayward behaviour of one of its members with respect to democratic norms and human rights?” (Tsoukalis 2014, 58). Accordingly, “if major institutions of liberal democracy in one member state radically deviate from the EU’s member states’ constitutional traditions, and undermine the rule of law, this is an issue that the EU needs to address directly” (Bugaric 2014, 25). All in all, this deviation of the Orbán governments has not only disturbed EU actions in many fields, as recently in the situation of Ukrainian crisis management, it has also developed contaminating effects on some other new member states as well. Thus, it represents a danger for the EU.⁹

THE DECOMPOSITION OF THE FIDESZ REGIME: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL TENSIONS

All three 2014 elections in Hungary—in April the parliamentary, in May the European, and in October the municipal elections—were won by Fidesz, and this triple victory has reinforced Hungary’s position as the worst-case scenario for democracy decline in ECE. The second Orbán government, in the absence of strong democratic opposition parties with meaningful political alternatives, and wielding a monopoly of public and a dominance of private media, could mobilize the “majority of the minority.” In such a way it won the unfair, manipulated parliamentary elections in 2014, gaining a two-thirds supermajority with 25 percent support of the entire electorate, which the third Orbán government has proclaimed as the full support of the Hungarian people.

After these elections it became evident that a special “party vacuum” had emerged, since the fragmented democratic opposition parties were unable to offer an alternative against the elected autocracy of the third Orbán government. The former democratic elite that had governed the country until 2010 again proved to be politically impotent and senile; in the 2014 elections, its leading political figures could not break the apathy of the impoverished population with respect to the authoritarian Fidesz rule. Actually, the fragmentation of the democratic opposition began with the entry of LMP (Lehet Más a Politika—Politics May Be Different) as a green party that produced a split, with radicals forming a new party called PM (Párbeszéd Magyarországért—Dialogue for Hungary). But the main fragmentation line has been within HSP, since, first, the former prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, and later his successor in this position, Gordon Bajnai, each formed a new party: DK (Demokratikus Koalíció—Democratic Coalition) and Együtt (Együtt Magyarországért—Together for Hungary), respectively. In fact, these four parties—LMP,

PM, DK and Együtt—form the democratic opposition in the parliament along with the HSP, which is still the largest among them. These five parties have been so engaged in competition that they cannot form a common program and political perspectives for the dissatisfied population.¹⁰

After October 2014, however, the period of apathy came to an end and a wave of mass demonstrations erupted in Hungary as a “Hot Autumn,” with some kind of “participatory turn,” although since then it has been overburdened with the gap and tensions between the old parties and the new movements. Following upon the October municipal elections, the Hot Autumn was the reaction of the Hungarian population both to the “hubris” of the newly entering third Orbán government and to the impotence of the small and fragmented democratic opposition parties. The re-elected Orbán government with its two-thirds supermajority regained saw no limits to its power and immediately began acting accordingly. Its “hubris” quickly became overwhelming, with new manifest corruption cases and with a proposal for an internet tax in the tough austerity budget for 2015. The wave of demonstrations developed into a “participatory turn” and brought an end to the “permissive consensus” or deep apathy of the broad masses. Actually, the demonstrations became in some ways “institutionalized,” with events closely following one another, several times a week. The biggest mass demonstrations have mobilized about one hundred thousand people and they have basically changed the public discourse and the political landscape in Hungary.¹¹

On the other side, the Hot Autumn has revealed the particularly strong external-internal linkages. The Orbán governments have provoked long and deep conflicts with the EU due to violations of European rules and values. Nevertheless, given the many other conflicts around the Eurozone and elsewhere, in the biggest and most influential member states, these conflicts with Hungary—and also with the other declining democracies—have been deep-frozen by the European Council and the European Commission. They have developed a policy of conflict avoidance in the Hungarian case by over-respecting the sovereignty of the member states, since they have not wanted to create precedents. Although the Barroso Commission took some steps in the spring of 2015, any confrontation with the damages wrought by the Orbán governments—and by other ECE governments—has been waiting for the incoming Juncker Commission. The violations of European rules and values have, nevertheless, been widely discussed several times in the European Parliament and this process will certainly continue.¹²

Last but not least, in October 2014 a serious “hot” conflict began between the U.S. and Hungarian governments over rampant corruption in the large pro-government Fidesz-associated firms, which was harming the interests of international enterprises. In early October 2014 the U.S. Embassy in Budapest announced a ban on

entry to the United States by six high government officials on corruption charges, and one of them turned out to be the president of the Hungarian National Tax and Customs Office (NAV). This unleashed a protracted debate between the two governments that has gone well beyond domestic corruption affairs to the realm of international conflicts, since the U.S. government has also been unhappy about the pro-Russian attitude of the Orbán government in the Ukrainian crisis. The manifestly negative turn of the Orbán regime away from Euro-Atlantic community policies has also been in the background of the mass demonstrations in Hungary, although they have been motivated first of all by domestic concerns.¹³

Parallel with the increase of organized, systemic corruption of the Fidesz elite, the Hungarian society has been impoverished in the last five years, first of all through impoverishment of the middle class, and it has entered, indeed, a “vale of tears.” The current international and domestic processes have reinforced each other and they have produced a mass dissatisfaction. Since October 2014 Fidesz has lost all by-elections, not only the local ones, but also three parliamentary by-elections, with two leftist and one Jobbik victory; hence it has also lost its parliamentary two-thirds majority. Thus, the public discourse and political landscape have changed in Hungary beyond recognition, since the Hungarian society has been on move. The Fidesz regime, having come under this pressure, has begun a radicalization, appropriating the extreme topics represented so far by Jobbik, in order to regain supporters; but this is in vain, since Jobbik has greater credibility on the issues of national-social populism.

The unfolding refugee crisis since spring 2015, however, has brought about a new turning point in Hungarian political developments, both at home and abroad. Following its usual approach, Fidesz has reacted to this crisis with a hate campaign; it has always excelled in the use of negative communication strategies identifying “enemies.” The third Orbán government has taken the opportunity for a new negative campaign to regain its popular support by focusing on domestic manipulation of the refugee crisis. The first reaction was putting up mega-posters all over the country—allegedly addressed to the refugees but in Hungarian—that they should not take away jobs from Hungarians and they should respect law and order in Hungary. Obviously, this message was really meant for Hungarians, to make the point that the government was ready to “protect” the country and its borders against any invasion. This has remained the approach of the Orbán government, during a crisis that has produced increasing conflict with the EU. The negligent, inhumane behavior toward the refugees has greatly diminished the respect for Hungary in the EU, notwithstanding the fact that thousands of civilians have tried to give assistance to refugees (Scheppele 2015a, 2015b). At

the time of writing, the outcome of the refugee crisis is not yet in sight for Europe in general or its consequences for Hungary in particular. For sure, the government has reinforced the xenophobic feelings in the population and it has strengthened its position for a while, but without solving, only delaying, the domestic socio-economic and political crisis.¹⁴

CONCLUSION: THE WEAKENING OF THE FIDESZ REGIME AND THE PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

In the third Orbán government, Hungarian society's catatonia and profound apathy has come to an end. This "mental illness" or stupor (insensible, unresponsive behavior) invaded Hungarian society in the 2010s, but, due to the hubris of Fidesz, society has finally awakened. Given the decomposition process of the Fidesz regime, with its deepening internal tensions and international confrontations, a new alternative has emerged for both sides of political spectrum. On the right side, the Jobbik has increased its support, and it has moved toward the center to become some kind of a "people's party" or center-right party with the aim of replacing Fidesz and forming the next government after the 2018 parliamentary elections. Since the party's victory in a by-election in mid-April 2015, gaining its very first seat in a single-member constituency, Gábor Vona, the party president, has declared that Jobbik has arrived at a historical milestone. The strategy is "to keep the core values of Jobbik's agenda while addressing citizens in such a civic form of political style and attitude that can be attractive for the widest layers of the society" (Vona 2015, 2). This new strategy has caused severe tensions within Jobbik between the original hard core and those moving toward the center with softened messages. At the same time, Jobbik has developed close contacts with the Putin regime, and allegedly it has received substantial financial support from it. Vona has continued to make pro-Russian declarations in the Ukrainian conflict and has identified himself as "Eurasian" (Krekó 2015). It is questionable whether this new strategy will be successful, since the larger part of society still sees Jobbik as an extreme right protest party that has no capacity to govern.¹⁵

As a reaction to the decline of democracy, the Hot Autumn also marked a new turning point on the left side with the mass democratic participation. Although the fragmented parties of democratic opposition have not benefited so far from the Fidesz crisis, the civic organizations have gained strength. This highlights the vital role of informal civic institutions in democracy building, since the mass demonstrations have been initiated by their leaders, experts, and supporters. The organizers of these mass demonstrations have come from the "schools" of the democracy-supporting institutions or NGOs (nongovernmental organizations). The

new, democracy-supporting informal institutions in Hungary have been acting as "icebreakers," serving as special political and policy instruments for the breakthrough to the re-establishment of democracy through "democratic innovations." The new situation has been accompanied by serious public debates about the relationships between the "new" social movements and the "old" political parties, and the gap between them has yet not disappeared.¹⁶

The new generation since the systemic change has been brought up in the democratic spirit and it has tried to return to the point of departure of democratization, waving the EU flag at mass demonstrations. This restart of democratization in Hungary makes it necessary to rethink the role of informal, civic institutions and to resume the discussion on the conceptual framework of democratization and Europeanization. The Hungarians are on the move now, and thanks to this participatory turn, Hungary may yet make a new contribution to ECE re-democratization.

NOTES

1. This paper has been based on the datasets of the major ranking institutions (e.g., BTI 2014; Bertelsmann 2015; EIU 2015; FH 2014; IMF 2014c; and WEF 2014). It also draws heavily on two journal special issues (Rupnik and Zielonka 2013; Epstein and Jacoby 2014) that focus on the backsliding of democracy and the failure to overcome the East-West divide in ECE.
2. Thamy Pogrebinschi has noted that "Higher demands for participation lead to higher political dissatisfaction when institutions do not properly accommodate them." Therefore, it is a situation of "misalignment of citizens' demands and political institutions' supply" (Pogrebinschi 2014, 55, 58). This missing political participation in ECE has been discussed in Demetriou (2013) country by country.
3. In FH 2014, Hungary is mentioned as having the largest decline in its democracy score by 2014. The Bertelsmann BTI and SGI reports (2014) have qualified Hungary as a "defective" rather than "deficit" democracy. <SGI 2014 source needs to be added to the References> In his introduction to the present special issue, Martin Brusis has analyzed the ECE party systems comparatively. He points out that Fidesz is the least pro-European and most authoritarian of the governing parties (see his Figure 2); see also Ilonszki and Várnagy 2014 and Ágh 2015.
4. The European Catch-Up Index 2014 (Lessenski 2014) documented the backsliding of Hungary between 2010 and 2014 in the EU28 rankings: from 20th place to 25th in overall rankings; similarly from 20th to 25th in the democracy rankings; and from 18th place to 25th place in quality-of-life rankings. In addition, Hungary was 25th in government effectiveness; 26th in conflict and tension rankings; and 27th in the credit, media freedom, and health rankings. The report pointed out that economy, democracy, quality of life, and good governance are closely correlated in ECE. In earlier papers I have emphasized the direct connection between the decline of democracy and the decreasing competitiveness of ECE (Ágh, 2013a,b and 2014a,b,c). It is important to note that Hungary's democratic performance and its competitiveness had already gone down slightly in the 2000s but they have declined drastically since 2010 under the Orbán governments (IMF 2014b,c and HEBC 2014).
5. Fidesz support in absolute figures (8.1 million electorate in 2004) has been as follows: 1990 (439, 481); 1994 (416, 143); 1998 (1,263, 522); 2002

- (2,306, 763); 2006 (2,272, 979); 2010 (2,743, 626); 2014 (2,142, 142 plus 122,638 votes from Hungarians in neighboring countries). Fidesz lost 600,000 voters in 2014, but with the new, manipulated electoral rules, the supermajority was reached again.
6. On state capture, see, for example, Innes 2014; and on captured democracy see Acemoglu and Robinson 2006 and 2009. On the widespread “closed” party patronage system in ECE, see Kopecky et al. 2012 and Nakrosis and Gudzikas 2013. The divergence of Hungary from the democratic mainstream during the second Orbán government was formulated by the Tavares Report adopted by the European Parliament on July 3, 2013, with a large majority. The Tavares Report is the most important EU document on the decline of democracy in ECE. It called for organizing a “Copenhagen Commission” and it requested “the establishment of a new mechanism to ensure compliance by all Member States with the common values enshrined in Article 2 TEU” (Tavares 2013,15).
 7. I have described the entire process of unfair, manipulated elections based on the arguments of Scheppele (2013a,b, 2014) and Mudde (2014); see also the very critical OSCE report (2014). In July 2014 the third Orbán government changed beyond recognition the electoral law of local governments for the early October elections.
 8. This war of oligarchs has been discussed in the international press with reference to the clashes between Orbán and Lajos Simicska, the main builder of the Fidesz economic power and the most influential oligarch. Fidesz leaders have sought to limit his influence but he has fought back very hard.
 9. This Hungarian—and Romanian—case has brought the danger of a “contaminating” effect to the other states. See Boulín-Ghica (2013), Sedelmeier (2014), and the OECD report by Nicolaidis and Kleinfeld (2012).
 10. In the 199-member parliament, Fidesz received 133 seats, followed by MSZP (29), Jobbik (23), LMP (5), DK (4), and Együtt-PM (4) seats. In a recent paper (Ágh 2015) I describe the electoral history and current situation of the Hungarian parties in detail.
 11. The wave of mass demonstrations began on October 23, 2014 (a national holiday marking the 1956 revolution) and built up to the biggest demonstration, against the internet tax, which was reported by the international media. In 2015 the demonstrations continued rather frequently but with less mass participation. On April 19, 2015, there were demonstrations against government corruption in more than fifty cities.
 12. A brief summary of the EU actions has to include the introduction of the EU Justice Scoreboard (with respect to Hungary, see especially EC 2013). In spring 2014 the Barroso Commission made a big effort to initiate a procedure (EC 2014a) that is supposed to be continued by the Juncker Commission. Moreover, the European Commission has taken the rampant corruption in ECE seriously and has collaborated on a report with Transparency International (EC 2014b).
 13. Parallel with the U.S. conflict, the Hungarian government has also provoked a conflict with the Norwegian government by intervening into the activities of the Hungarian NGOs sponsored by the Norwegian Civil Fund. The government officials declared in the Putin style that the NGO activists were “traitors” working for foreign agencies, and in September 2014 the police raided the office of the Eco-Soc (Ökotárs) Foundation. The series of attacks on Hungarian NGOs generated a public protest and at some mass demonstrations the participants waved the EU and Norwegian flags.
 14. As a reaction to the impoverishment there has been a high level of xenophobia in Hungary. Jobbik has benefited from it, but due to the refugee crisis Fidesz has recently been capitalizing on it more. Two Hungarian organizations—Political Capital (www.politicalcapital.hu) and Policy Solutions (www.policysolutions.hu)—have been deeply involved in an international research network on right-wing extremism (DEREX—Demand for Right-Wing Extremism—at www.dereindex.eu).

15. The policy institutes of Political Capital and Policy Solutions have produced many papers on Jobbik. The international press has widely followed Jobbik; see, for example, the comparative ECE approach by Mazurczak (2014) and Polyakova (2015).
16. The research on democracy innovations has been a new trend in democratization research. See, for example, the initiatives of Morlino (2012) and Newton (2012).

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