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Anti-Democratic Politics in Hungary: Viktor Orbán and "Illiberal Democracy"[i]

By Susan Rubin Suleiman

Hungary has been in the news lately, often mentioned as an example of "illiberal democracy," a term coined by its current prime minister, Viktor Orbán. The idea of an illiberal democracy may seem like a contradiction in terms, but Orbán is proud of having coined the phrase, because the way he uses it, "illiberal" is the opposite of liberal or left-wing. He is happy to claim that Hungary is "illiberal" in that sense. But most independent commentators view Orbán's version of illiberal democracy as a dangerous trend, because it maintains the outward appearances of a democracy (nobody gets arrested or sent to prison in Hungary for insulting the government), but in fact seeks to undermine all the institutions and norms that give democracy meaning. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt put it in their well-known book, *How Democracies Die*, "Elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance."[ii] The questions I would like to explore here, with Hungary as our specific case, are: a) how do such elected autocrats, of whom Orbán is a particularly good example, succeed in doing this? and b) what are the possibilities for resisting such attempts to monopolize power?

Hungarians speak a language that is not related to that of any of their neighbors (Hungarian is part of the Finno-Ugric language group, whose origins are Asian), and which they consider unique. As a little girl growing up in Budapest, I was often told that Hungarian is impossible to learn by anyone not born there! Until 1918, Hungary was part of the Hapsburg Empire, which occupied a significant chunk of Europe.

After the First World War, the Empire was dissolved and a cluster of independent countries were created in its stead, but in the process Hungary lost more than two-thirds of its former territory (as is apparent by

Hungarian geo-political history: a few important dates

As the map above makes clear, Hungary is a small country in the middle of Europe – yet

comparing the two maps). This loss became a very sore point for many Hungarians and encouraged a wounded nationalism and sense of injury that has been exploited by politicians right up to today.

In sum, Hungary is a small but very proud country, with a bit of a chip on its shoulder – and more importantly, it is not a country with a tradition or experience of democratic government, as is clear in the brief summary of regimes below.

Political regimes in Hungary

Ca. 1700-1918: Hungary is part of the Hapsburg Empire; in 1867, it gains partial autonomy in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy or Dual Monarchy

1919-1920: Various short-lived regimes (democratic, communist, counter-revolutionary)

1920-1944: Regime of Miklós Horthy (nominally a parliamentary system, but in practice authoritarian)

1944-1945: Nazi occupation and Fascist Arrow Cross regime

1945-1949: Functioning parliamentary democracy, gradually taken over by the Communist Party

1949-1989: Communist Party rule, behind the Iron Curtain

1989-today: Parliamentary democracy, heading toward "illiberal democracy"

Between the two World Wars, the government was theoretically a parliamentary system with competing political parties, but in reality it was one-party rule headed by the autocratically inclined Miklós Horthy, who was Head of State from 1920 to October 1944. (The one-party stranglehold on power was achieved mostly through restrictive voting). During World War II, Horthy was an ally of Hitler. When it became clear that Germany would lose the war, Horthy made separate overtures to the Allies, whereupon Hitler's troops invaded Hungary in March 1944, deported more than 400,000 Jews with the Horthy government's cooperation, and installed the Fascist Arrow Cross regime in Horthy's stead in October. The Soviet Army drove out the Germans and the Hungarian fascists in January and February 1945, but then long overstayed its welcome: Soviet troops did not completely leave Hungary until 1991.

After just a few years of genuine parliamentary democracy, between 1945 and 1949, Hungary sank into totalitarianism under the Communist Party, and remained there, behind the Iron Curtain, for forty years. Thus, **i**n all of Hungary's history before 1989, only one brief period, in bold above (1945-1949), can actually be called a functioning democracy. In 1989, the Berlin Wall finally came down and the Iron Curtain countries came out from under communist rule, with the promise of Western-inspired democratic governments.

The promises of 1989

The change in regime promised a whole new order, starting with a Constitution founded on rule of law. It stipulated free and fair elections, where multiple parties would

compete for power in Parliament; freedom of the press and of individual expression, with no repression by the party in power; an independent judiciary, free of interference from the government in deciding cases; the autonomy of institutions of higher education in teaching and research; and last but not least, respect for human rights, including minorities and non-citizens.

One serious hitch in the 1989 Constitution was that it allowed for major revisions and amendments if they were passed by a two-thirds majority of the Parliament – that loophole could lead to serious abuses, as we shall see. The fact that it is so hard to amend the U.S. Constitution is actually a great advantage, by comparison.

Were the promises fulfilled in the years that followed? In large part, yes, certainly for the first 20 years or so. A democratic Constitution was adopted in October 1989, which laid out all of the above principles and many others – it was drafted clearly with a view to Hungary's joining the European Union. In 2004, Hungary was admitted to the EU, along with a number of other former Communist countries, including Poland.

One can say fairly confidently that today, Hungarians are on the whole much better off than they were during the Communist years. They can travel as they like, express their opinions as they like, and participate in peaceful demonstrations if they like. They have cell phones and uncontrolled access to the Internet and their markets and malls are full of both local and imported goods, at least in Budapest and other large cities. In rural areas (about 30 percent of the population), many people live in dismaying poverty. This unfortunate division between prosperous cities and struggling countryside is one we see in other countries as well, including the U.S. (In the U.S., the rural population is approximately 20 percent). An average tourist in Budapest will see beautifully illuminated monuments and bridges, restored historic sites as well as new constructions, theaters, concert halls and restaurants frequented by both locals and tourists (all this before the COVID-19 pandemic, of course). This is due in large part to the generous financial subsidies, especially for public works projects, provided by the European Union to its formerly Communist members.

If that is the case, why talk about anti-democratic politics in Hungary today? Because despite all this apparent wellbeing, the country has been moving increasingly in an authoritarian direction since the 2010 election, when Viktor Orbán's party, Fidesz, gained a two-thirds majority in Parliament.[iii] Fidesz's name is an acronym that stands for Young Democratic Alliance. Back in 1989, when the party was founded, Orbán was indeed a young democrat, demanding the total withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary and benefiting from study-abroad fellowships that familiarized him with Western democracies. By 2010, however, he had changed quite a bit – he had gotten not only older and paunchier, he had also moved considerably to the right. It must be said that the Socialist Party, which had been in power for two terms before Fidesz's victory, had not done too great a job, and people were fed up with it. However, many were horrified when the first thing Orbán did with his two-thirds majority was to rewrite the

Constitution, which they now called the "Foundational Law" (*Alaptörvény*), a name that suggests it can be more easily amended than a traditional constitution. Indeed, Fidesz has continually amended the 2011 "Foundational Law," imposing more and more restrictions, such as requiring a two-thirds vote for many types of laws it considers essential (*sarkalatos törvény*). This will almost guarantee Parliamentary paralysis, in any government that has a slimmer majority.

Weakening the judiciary and the press

The first institution Orbán targeted was the judiciary: according to the new Constitution, judges were forced to retire at a younger age, thus giving Orbán the power to name new ones. More importantly, the powers of the courts were reduced. And since the Constitutional Court could declare certain laws passed by Parliament as unconstitutional but had no jurisdiction over amendments to the Constitution itself, Orbán's party could simply change the Constitution over and over if it wanted to claim legality technically, even while doing away with important safeguards. Many of the changes, in 2010 and later, clearly went against human rights or the rights of minorities, thus violating some of the core principles of the European Union. (One example: a recent amendment defines a family as consisting of a man, a woman and their offspring, thus excluding nontraditional families from government protection. Along the same lines, in June 2021, yet another law was passed, targeting homosexuals and LBGTQ individuals, despite protests at home and abroad.) The EU has taken up such irregularities and referred them to the European Court of Justice, which has declared them to be violations of EU principles, but Orbán predictably responds that Hungary is a sovereign state, not to be interfered with. This is one of the big problems facing the EU currently – how to discipline member states that go against its core provisions regarding the rule of law. I will return to it later.

After the judiciary, Fidesz's next big target was the press. The new Constitution of 2011 created a Media Council to oversee radio and TV stations and impose heavy fines on those that violated its rules – but since the members of the Council were all named by Orbán, this was designed specifically to muzzle criticism of the government, and to bankrupt stations that did not censor themselves.

The other tactic for muzzling the media, including the newspapers, was more devious. As Orbán's enablers became richer and richer because of the huge government contracts they received, thanks to subsidies from the EU, they started buying up TV and radio stations as well as print media, and either transformed them into government vehicles or, if that proved impossible, simply shut them down, alleging unprofitability. When Hungary's largest independent newspaper, *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom), which had often criticized Orbán, was suddenly shut down in October 2016 by its new owner, who claimed (incorrectly) that the paper had suffered huge losses, many people understood that it was as a result of personal pressure by Orbán.

Today, there is only one daily print

newspaper in the country that criticizes the government: the small-circulation paper *Népszava*, People's Word. Half a dozen national papers function as government megaphones, in addition to regional newspapers that do the same, and every single TV station is a government vehicle. There are still one or two independent radio stations, but they are constantly being threatened with closure by the Media Council. The most popular one, Klub Rádio, actually lost its frequency in early 2021 and can now only be heard on the Internet. A few independent weekly magazines that do not hesitate to criticize the government still exist (chief among them are *HVG*, whose format resembles that of *The Economist*, and *Élet és Irodalom*, a literary and political weekly in newspaper format), and people with access to the Internet can get reliable news from a couple of online dailies. But those in rural areas have no way of getting news other than from government-friendly media, unless they pay subscription fees that many cannot afford.

Next targets: the electoral system and migrants

By 2012, Fidesz had succeeded in weakening both the press and the judiciary, two pillars of a democratic state. Then, in preparation for the 2014 elections, Orbán's party attacked yet another pillar of democracy: the electoral system. Here it used the tried and true method of divide and conquer. Hungary has a large number of political parties, like most other European countries. Until 2010, the Parliamentary elections were held in two rounds, by a system that allowed for elimination of some candidates and consolidation of others between round one and round two. After 2010, the system was "reformed" so that there was only one round, which meant that in any given constituency, the numerous small, ideologically diverse opposition parties could not compete against the large governing party. Furthermore, the number of seats in Parliament was reduced from 386 to 199. All of this was technically legal, but most observers noted that the new system was designed with a specific end in mind: Fidesz's continued power.

With this new system, Fidesz won again in 2014, by a two-thirds majority. Still, Orbán was losing some popular support because of the rampant corruption that was becoming more and more obvious, with his best friends becoming billionaires while huge numbers of people lived in poverty. But a major historical event refloated Orbán's boat: in 2015, the Syrian migrant crisis brought many thousands of refugees to Hungary's southern borders, and Orbán became a hero by building a barbed wire fence. Hungary was not going to allow Muslim refugees to seek asylum there, he declared, and the EU could not force Hungary to do so. This aggressive stance made many Hungarians happy, and it catapulted Orbán into a starring role as the defender of Christian Europe against the Muslim hordes.

Poland, another former communist country now led by a would-be autocrat, has become a close ally of Hungary in defying the immigration guidelines of the European Union; anti-immigrant parties in Germany, Italy, France and Austria have also gained ground as a result of the migrant crisis. As we know, politicians can get terrific mileage

out of anti-immigrant rhetoric, and Orbán is a very clever politician. The fact that in the U.S., another anti-immigrant candidate was elected President against all odds in 2016 could only reinforce Orbán's views as he began to prepare his next reelection campaign.

Soros as scapegoat

In 2017, taking another page from the American playbook but pushing it much further, Orbán found a perfect scapegoat on whom to pin the blame for the migrant "invasion": none other than the billionaire philanthropist George Soros. As is well known, Soros (who will be 91 years old in August) is the bogeyman of the extreme right in the U.S. and a favorite target of conspiracy theorists. However, he was even more useful as a punching bag to Orbán because Soros is a Hungarian Jew who emigrated from Hungary in 1947. He has contributed huge amounts of money to NGOs and pro-democracy movements all over Eastern Europe since 1989. In fact, it was a Soros-sponsored Foundation that awarded a fellowship to the young Viktor Orbán in 1989 so that he could study at Oxford University in England for a few months. In the early 1990s, Soros had founded a major university in Budapest, the Central European University, a topnotch graduate school that attracted students from all over the world but especially from eastern Europe – and that also gave employment to hundreds if not thousands of Hungarians, in jobs ranging from cloakroom attendant to administrator to full professor. I know this from personal experience, because I spent a very productive semester at the CEU's Institute for Advanced Study in the fall of 2017, and met a number of its faculty and alumni as well as other researchers.

In 2017, gearing up for his election campaign, Orbán decided to attack both the University and its founder, in the name of Hungarian national sovereignty. That spring, the Hungarian Parliament, led by Fidesz, enacted a law stating that any university incorporated abroad had to have a campus in its home country in order to operate in Hungary. The CEU, existing only in Budapest but incorporated in New York State, was the only university that fit the description: the law was clearly targeting it and nothing else. This law provoked mass demonstrations in support of the university as soon as it was passed, but the government stuck to its guns. After months of negotiation with the State of New York and Bard College, the CEU succeeded in forging an alliance with Bard, thus satisfying the law's stricture. All officials on the American side signed off on the plan, but it then sat for over a year awaiting the signature of Viktor Orbán and the approval of Parliament. In the end (after the 2018 election), the signatures were refused, and in 2019 the CEU was forced to move most of its operations to Vienna, where it is thriving. Its departure has been a real loss to Hungary both financially and intellectually, but Orbán could claim victory over a "foreign" presence in Budapest.

With the hounding of the university came the hounding of its founder. When I saw my first anti-Soros poster in October 2017, at a bus stop in Budapest where paid advertising would normally go, I could not quite believe my eyes. What was this laughing photograph of George Soros about? I had

heard that over the previous summer, billboards featuring Soros had been plastered all over Hungary, carrying the admonition "Let's Not Let Him Have the Last Laugh" (last laugh about what?), but I had been told they had been taken down after an international outcry. This was something new.

Across the top of the poster, above Soros's head, ran a line in large block letters: "A SOROS-TERVRŐL," ABOUT THE SOROS-PLAN. And beneath that: "6th question. The aim of the Soros Plan is to squeeze the languages and cultures of European countries into the background, in order to facilitate the integration of illegal immigrants." This is followed by a question in larger letters: "What do you think about this?" And on the bottom, running along the whole width of the poster, a banner headline: "Let's not remain silent about it!"

I soon found out that this "Question 6" came from a flyer the government called a "national consultation," which had been mailed to all Hungarian voters in the beginning of October. The flyer listed seven questions of a similar kind: What do you think about Hungary being forced by the EU to give millions of Forints to migrants? What do you think about reduced jail sentences for migrants who commit crimes? and so on. This "national consultation" was not a referendum with a binding vote, just an opinion survey, but it had a purpose. Its message was that the all-powerful "billionaire speculator" as Soros was designated by the pro-government papers, who apparently had the EU in his pocket, wanted to ruin European culture by encouraging undesirable aliens to invade it. The word "Jew" was never pronounced, but it did not need to be: the stereotype of the "rich Jew who wants to take over the world" was understood by everyone. The message was also trumpeted in newspapers, which never missed a day putting Soros's image on the front page for several weeks in a row.

The fact that there was no such thing as a Soros Plan and that every single "proposal" attributed to Soros was false, explicitly declared as such by Soros himself, did not prevent over two million Hungarians (out of a total population of ten million) from returning their surveys. The government issued a statement calling it "the most successful consultation of all time," which proved that "Hungarians do not wish Hungary to receive any immigrants." What they also proved is that if people do not have access to truthful information and are pounded with its opposite from day to day, they will believe the most outlandish lies.

The latest target: the higher education system

In the 2018 election, Fidesz won yet again,

this time by a razor-thin two-thirds majority (Fidesz reached the two-thirds by a single representative). This allowed it to realize another round of technically legal but illegitimate amendments to the Constitution and other power-grabbing moves. I will mention only their most recent, and in some ways most dangerous, power grab, which is the takeover of higher education. In addition to a free press, an independent judiciary, and fair elections, an autonomous higher education system is essential to the proper functioning of a democracy. This was clearly recognized by article 70/G of Hungary's 1989 Constitution, which stated:

1) The Republic of Hungary shall respect and support the freedom of scientific and artistic expression, the freedom to learn and to teach.

(2) Only scientists are entitled to decide questions of scientific truth and to determine the scientific value of research.[iv]

Starting in 2019, and right up to today, the Orbán government has taken measures to counteract both of the above-stated principles, and, despite strong protest from educators and the public, they have so far succeeded. Perhaps emboldened by their success in ousting the Central European University, the Orbán government eliminated the one other existing program in gender studies offered at a university in Hungary (the prestigious Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest). It imposed a newly created post on university administration, filled by a government appointee, which deprived the academic Rectors of much of their power. It even managed to take over the budget of the venerable Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which funds the work of research institutes in history and literature as well as in the social and hard sciences. By determining which projects get funded, the government in effect deprives the Academy of intellectual autonomy. In literature, for example, some justly forgotten writers have been dusted off because of their nationalistic or right-wing ideas.

The latest and most egregious of these strangleholds on academic autonomy occurred just in the past year: it consists of placing Hungary's public universities (most of the major universities in Hungary are public, as in other European countries) under the jurisdiction of private foundations. The foundations then become the universities' legal owners even as they continue to receive government subsidies. Each foundation has a Board, whose members are appointed by the government, and, so far, almost all of them are businessmen or politicians, not academics. They will continue in their positions even if by some miracle the elections of 2022 sweep Fidesz out of power. The Board of each foundation decides on academic appointments and programs and also has the power to fire faculty, who are no longer considered civil servants or government employees as before. In the case of universities of medicine or science, any profits made on new discoveries now go to their foundations, which presents lots of opportunity for private enrichment.

As of February 2021, seven universities in the country had been "foundationalized," with more on the way. The faculty and students may be kicking and screaming, but if these faculty and students want to continue teaching or studying at a major university, they will have to accept the fait accompli. One such case is with the topnotch University of Film and Theater Arts in Budapest, which saw massive

demonstrations against the policy over several months in 2020 and 2021. Some professors at the University of Film and Theater Arts have started a new private university, but that option is not available to most academics, and it is not clear whether accreditation will be granted.

Hope for resistance?

That is where things stand in the spring of 2021, with Hungary's "illiberal democracy." Orbán and his friends are getting richer every day, even as they proclaim the importance of Hungarian sovereignty and put their own stamp on every aspect of political and social life. The question is, can anything be done about it, or will they continue to hold power for the foreseeable future, the way Putin and his friends seem to be doing in Russia?

I can see two possible glimmers of hope: the union of the splintered opposition parties and the increased pressure of the European Union. In municipal elections two years ago, all the opposition parties got together and backed a single candidate against Fidesz in select jurisdictions, and their candidates won in most of the major cities (Budapest and several other cities now have non-Fidesz mayors and city councils). If they can do the same in next year's Parliamentary election – and it looks like they are planning to do that – they may be able to wrest the majority away from Fidesz. This will not be easy because there are huge ideological and policy differences among the opposition parties, but at least it would loosen Orbán's stranglehold on power. (A similarly heterogeneous coalition has just come to power in Israel, ousting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after twelve years in his position.)

The second glimmer of hope is that the European Union has been exerting more pressure, of late, to have Hungary correct its most blatant abuses of the rule of law. This is not easy either, for reasons having to do with the EU's complicated rules about disciplining member states. This process in the most important instances requires unanimity, but as long as Hungary can count on the support of its fellow "illiberal democracy," Poland (and vice versa, since similar problems exist in Poland as well), a unanimous condemnation of either country is impossible. Still, in March 2021, the European People's Party, a large center-right coalition in the EU Parliament that Hungary was part of, finally came to the point of expelling the Hungarian delegation – whereupon the Hungarians "resigned" before they were made to leave. Either way, this is the strongest rap on the knuckles that the EU has administered to Hungary so far, but it does not prevent Hungary from continuing to receive huge financial subsidies from the EU, nor does it deprive Hungary from voting rights in the organization. Until he can be punished more substantively, Viktor Orbán will continue to thumb his nose at the EU by flaunting Hungary's "national sovereignty," even as he pockets the EU's money.

NOTES

[i]This paper is the edited and updated version of the lecture I delivered in Professor Richard J. Golsan's class, "Introduction to International Studies," at Texas A&M University, March 11, 2021.

[ii]Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018), p. 5.

[iii]The facts I report in what follows are based on my personal knowledge of Hungary, my native country, where I spent a semester of research in the fall of 2017 and where I have returned several times before and since. Two recent books that analyze in detail Orbán's "strongman" tactics are Bálint Magyar's *Post-Communist Mafia State: the Case of Hungary* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016) and Paul Lendvai's *Orbán: Europe's New Strongman* (London: Hurst and Company, 2019). Earlier this year, the Franco-German TV station Arte showed an excellent documentary by Michael Wech, "La Hongrie: Orbán et l'Etat de droit/Hungary: Orbán and the Rule of Law" (in French with English subtitles), which is currently available on YouTube. The film lays out in detail Orbán's fraught relations with the European Union and his latest maneuvers in consolidating power in Hungary, as well as the rampant corruption and personal enrichment of people in his orbit. For a daily update on Hungarian politics in English, see the excellent blog *Hungarian Spectrum* (www.hungarianspectrum.org) by Eva S. Balogh, Emerita Professor of History at Yale.

[iv]A Google search of "Constitution of Hungary" in early 2021 yielded the full text, in English, of the 1989 constitution and all of its amended versions; in June 2021, one has to dig deeper to find that information. The full text of the 2011 version can be accessed here: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Hungary_2011.pdf , but more recent amendments to it are hard to find. As for the 1989 constitution, it can be accessed here: http://lapa.princeton.edu/hosteddocs/hungary/1989-90%20constitution_english.pdf The comparison between 1989 and 2011 is sobering.

Susan Rubin Suleiman

Susan Rubin Suleiman was born in Budapest and emigrated to the U.S. as a child with her parents. She is the C. Douglas Dillon Professor of the Civilization of France Emerita and Professor of Comparative Literature Emerita at Harvard University, where she joined the faculty in 1981. Her books include *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*, (1983; appeared simultaneously in French); *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (1990); *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (2006; translated into French, Spanish and Portuguese), and *The Némirovsky Question: The Life, Death, and Legacy of a Jewish Writer in 20th Century France* (2016; French translation 2017).

Suleiman is also the author of a memoir, *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* (1996; French translation 1999), and has published over 100 articles in professional journals as well as the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, *Moment Magazine*, *Tablet*, and other publications.

She has won many honors, including fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Central European University. In 1990, she received the Radcliffe Medal for Distinguished Achievement, and in 1992 she was decorated by the French Government as an Officer of the Order of Academic Palms (Palmes Académiques). In April 2018, she was awarded France's highest honor, the Légion d'Honneur. She currently lives in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

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