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Hungary's Thirst for Freedom in Politics and Daily Life

Individualism and the Notion of Freedom in the Hungarian Mind

European debates tend to ignore the fact that Hungarian politics—sometimes peculiar and certainly unusual to many Western observers—is not meant to curb liberties or enable oppression but, on the contrary, to further freedom and efforts to attain it. However, Hungary's unconventional approach to freedom and emphatic advocacy of individualism can hardly be understood without some familiarity with the country's intellectual history and political culture, and with the mindset, customs, and received patterns of behaviour of the people living here.

FOREIGN PERCEPTIONS OF HUNGARY

The German media, in the broad sense of the term, depicts Hungary as a flawed democracy, a quasi-autocratic state allowing only limited fundamental rights. Worse, a growing number of German citizens have been adopting this view of the country. By way of proof, they cite the reform policy measures implemented during the three administrative terms since Viktor Orbán took office as prime minister in 2010, which they claim impose restrictions on liberties. The narrative favoured by the Western media adds that the Hungarian people acquiesced to these restrictions with stoical indifference. This opinion is particularly galling in light of the famous passion for freedom of Hungarians, who have always fought steadfastly against any form of oppression, real or imagined.

Indeed, politicians in Hungary must act with special prudence in implementing any reform, precisely because the citizens are intensely critical of any infringement on their liberties the moment they sense it. Unfortunately, the picture painted by much of the German media is oblivious to these details. The gaps in knowledge and duplicitous hints give Hungary a bad reputation, making foreign observers increasingly sceptical, dismissive of, or even hostile towards the country. This somewhat misleading media approach to Hungary has been discussed and assessed in several monographs.¹ The negative perception of Hungary, especially in German public opinion, has caused some very real friction and repercussions that we have so far been unable to remedy.

A COUNTRY OF 10 MILLION FREEDOM FIGHTERS

A famous statesman once remarked that Hungary was difficult to govern because it was a country of ten million freedom fighters. The truth of this statement would be hard to refute, given that it expresses a default sentiment with deep roots in the souls and minds of the Hungarian people. The habit of constant struggle, rebellion, and of ceaselessly questioning the decisions of the state and the authorities that he goes back a long time in the colourful history of the nation, but has always come to the fore under foreign rule.



Bertalan Székely, *Women of Eger* (1867). Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



‘Hungarian politics [...] is not meant to curb liberties or enable oppression’

This basic stance was only honed further during the decades of communism and the chaotic, tentative 1990s that followed them. Throughout history, the Hungarian thirst for freedom showed itself in repeated rebellions, uprisings, and revolutions against the Ottoman Turks, the Habsburgs, and the Soviets. While under foreign occupation resistance was mainly directed at external forces, during communism it found expression in what we call a second publicity, in a deftly balanced system of interaction between public and private utterances as well as between official and unofficial practices. In those days, it took special courage, savvy, and even cunning, to maintain passive resistance to the autocratic state by circumventing official rules and outwitting the dictates of power. This mentality survives to this day among Hungarians, making it common to cite and insist on individual liberties, often without regard to the public good.

FREEDOM FIGHT IN POLITICS

These patterns, experiences, and mental techniques are not always easy to recognize in the field of politics. Indeed, we often view and evaluate decisions made in Brussels or elsewhere from the point of view of our own national sovereignty. After the tempestuous and chaotic chapters of Hungarian history, the democratic turn reinstated the country as an entirely sovereign entity. The restoration of this vital component of independent statehood was embodied in the constituent assembly of the first freely elected Parliament on 2 May 1990, following the fall of communism. The ability, after long periods as a dependency of various political formations, to be responsible for ourselves in a free and sovereign state, to make our own decisions in the name of self-determination, is something the significance of which has become all but unrecognized in much of Western Europe. For Hungarians,

these were the freest, most wonderful years, the time we finally managed to come into our own as a nation. Hungary's politics must remain oriented toward its citizens, providing them with ideas, guidance, and measures that serve the well-being of the country. This way of thinking goes a long way toward explaining several aspects of the government's communication and policies. Without acknowledging this attitude, it is impossible to understand the ambitions of the country's political leadership and the challenges it faces, particularly because of the citizens' sensitivity to official practices. These considerations are crucial for the Hungarian yearning for freedom, manifested in various dialogues conducted by Hungarian politicians with international actors, often with senior officials of the European Union.

INDIVIDUALISM AND DEVOTION TO FREEDOM

Hungarians are regarded as great individualists² who cherish their freedom. These attitudes and the patterns of behaviour informed by them are evident in the way they conduct their day-to-day lives. In the 1990s, post-totalitarian Hungarian society experienced an exhilarating upswing of individual liberties that must have seemed nearly impossible to comprehend or explain from the distance of Germany. This euphoria found its pinnacle of expression in the constant scepticism and almost routine dismissal with which Hungarians greeted government measures—except of course those recognized for their ability to deliver immediate benefits for them as individuals. This mentality remains very much alive and well today, and is one of the reasons why governing the country presents such difficulties to the government, including the top executives of state power. However, 2010 ushered in a moral-ideational turn toward reconciling individual interests with the common weal in certain areas of society. Yet freedom-loving Hungarians often continue to see otherwise necessary and useful measures as the first signs of an effort to rein in their individual freedom. What

passes for a simple administrative measure elsewhere in Europe tends to be viewed in Hungary first and foremost as a restriction. Hungarians then waste no time in voicing their discontent and indignation, leaving no choice for the unsuspecting foreign observer but to regard the decried measure in question as but another step toward curbing freedom and building a dictatorship. This is because, where they come from, a measure of the government would surely not be able to spark such a reaction unless this was the case.

FREEDOM FIGHT IN DAILY AFFAIRS, OR WHY GOVERNING IS SUCH A WEARISOME JOB— SOCIAL SECURITY CONTRIBUTIONS

In Hungary today, anyone without a job subject to the withholding of the social security contribution can be part of the social security system for about HUF 8,400 a month. Over the past few years, tens of thousands of citizens have availed themselves of these health services, many without having paid any of their mandatory contributions for decades. Apart from a first notice to pay, which was never followed by further notices let alone sanctions, no official process was ever brought against the offending subjects. It is hardly surprising that they thought it best to leave it at that and not pay a penny. The tax authorities and the agencies of the state-run health care system decided it was not worth going after a few tens of thousands of individuals in default, if only because those in employment paid their dues anyway, helping to finance health care for the rest. In this way, many people accessed benefits to which they were not entitled, and did so at the expense of the community in the name of solidarity. This status quo persisted for many years, probably without bothering many people too much. At one point, however, the government resolved to put the house in order, based on the principle that if you want to use a service, you must pay for it. The contemplated measure was not to have retroactive effect, so the individual debts accumulated over the years would be forgiven and, as such, obviously not assigned to collection.

Even though the measure was to make the pay-for-service measure applicable to future health care subjects only, it was met with massive public uproar and condemnation. That the government was placing human lives and health in jeopardy was but one of the milder accusations flung around. A Budapest district mayor of the opposition went so far as to pledge to pay for the contributions of district residents up to four times a year, from the local municipal budget. The grace period before blocking access to medical services for reasons of default was originally planned to be three months, but this was subsequently modified to six months under public pressure. When the new regulation was introduced in mid-2020, what happened after all that vociferous protest and indignation was something nobody had expected: nothing. From that point on, people began to pay their dues, and resigned themselves to the fact that there is no such thing as a free lunch. This made everyone realize that the reform should have been implemented much sooner—except that a fear of losing votes or simple apathy had prevented a string of administrations from tackling the issue.

There are many more examples of a similar nature. A case in point was the traditional waiver of local and intercity mass transportation fares for citizens aged 65 or older (and, by implication of the principle of equal treatment, for any other citizen of the European Union meeting the age requirement). However, it was a different story with the Internet Tax scheduled to be introduced in 2014—a very low rate of tax imposed on online data traffic. The measure was motivated by the idea that for reasons of equitability, among other considerations, online telephone calls should be taxed at the same rate as those applicable to text messages. After wide-ranging protests, with young users accounting for the bulk of the approximately 100,000 demonstrators, the tax measure was repealed. Since then, even a preferred-rate VAT has been introduced on internet use. Pretty much the same happened the following year with the measure declaring Sunday as a mandatory business closure day. The measure elicited social discontent on such

a scale that it was rescinded in less than a year. Today, Hungarian citizens are free to do their shopping, have their cars washed, or use other services on Sunday. There is no such thing as business hours regulated by law or anything of the kind. By the same token, it would be completely inconceivable in Hungary to have leisure activities restricted by any provision of law, as was the case in Germany for a long time with the ban on dancing or attending arcades or casinos.

MANDATORY PERMANENT ADDRESS REGISTRATION

According to estimates, hundreds of thousands of Hungarians today reside at a location other than their officially registered home address. Some commentators explain this by negligence or indifference. Others cite the lack of time to file, the protection of privacy, or even the disturbing possibility that a landlord rents out a property under the table and refuses to approve the tenant's registration in order to evade taxes. These explanations would simply not make sense to anyone outside Hungary, and quite rightly so. Here, however, people hardly ever bother to change their residence in their official records, choosing instead to remain registered for decades at the address where they were born. Year by year, more than a few municipalities have to deal with public indignation just because they stipulate a registered address in the district as a condition for unlimited residential parking permit for an annual fee of just EUR 2.50—in a parking zone where the hourly rate is about EUR 1.00. Incomprehensibly, this is seen as an offensive measure by many.

FREE CHOICE OF VOTING LOCATION

This phenomenon, probably due to the negligence of voter registration that is prevalent in Hungary, has led to a bizarre desire to travel during general elections, with citizens crisscrossing the country to cast their ballots. Of course, the law does allow people to vote for a candidate of the constituency of their home address at a location different from that address, but relatively few ever exercise this option. (Mail-in ballots are not available

for citizens residing in the country.) More importantly, Hungarians living in a foreign country often do not give up their registered address in Hungary. This means that they do not officially qualify as residing abroad, so they cannot cast their ballot by mail and must go to their local Hungarian consulate in person to vote. In fact, this option should only be open to those staying abroad on a temporary basis, for instance on vacation, a business trip, or attending an Erasmus programme. Be that as it may, every four years we hear from outraged citizens about the injustice of the system which allegedly discriminates against these voters by mandating that they travel to a representation. Opposition politicians claim, in all sincerity without a doubt, that this is how the ‘Orbán regime’ tries to avenge itself on those who ‘fled from the dictatorship’. What they fail to mention is that this is how the electoral process has always worked in Hungary. They also remain silent about the fact that the moment these voters relinquished their permanent registered home address in Hungary, it would be far easier for them to participate in the general elections.

Thus everyone in Hungary is free to cast a ballot in any voter district, as long as the candidate is nominated in the constituency of the given voter’s registered place of residence. All the citizen has to do is register with the Elections Office at least nine days before election day, in person or online. Before the deadline, the registration can be modified any time, free of charge, and without explanation. The same applies to voter registration with a foreign representation. The nationwide mailing of voter documents and information takes tremendous organization and entails massive costs, but people take this for granted. There is no doubt that any initiative to streamline the mechanism, by making at least some of its components more restrictive, would be nipped in the bud by the public. Hungarian people have a rather refined ability to sniff out any threat to their individual liberties, be it real or imagined. For instance, most Hungarians would consider it an undue infringement on their freedom if they were forced to cast their ballot physically in their

own district, to meet tighter deadlines, or to act more prudently in exercising their freedom of choice and action—a valuable resource in any place, at any time.

DEADLINES AND APPOINTMENTS AS RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM

In the autumn of 2021, the COVID vaccination campaign in Hungary proceeded by fits and starts, not so much because of the shortage of vaccines or inferior organization as due to the general jadedness of the public under the protracted emergency and the reluctance of most Hungarian citizens to commit to a specific time and date of appointment. Unlike in Germany, however, the vaccination centres never shut down, but continued to honour their appointments. Every Hungarian citizen was free to choose the location and time to get the shot, and to specify the brand of vaccine to be used. Hungary was and is the only member state of the European Union which offers a choice between all six of the commercially available vaccine brands. When the weekly rate of vaccination had settled at around a few thousand patients, the government decided to exploit the proverbial Hungarian insistence on freedom of choice by enabling citizens, as of November 2021, to get the shot on any of three days during the week, including weekends, at a vaccination centre of choice, without making an appointment. The first ‘vaccination campaign weekend’ was attended by nearly 800,000 people. This made sense in view of the fact that Hungarians tend to be averse to making a commitment to a specific date. If they must decide where they will be and what they will do a few days later, they will regard this requirement as an infringement of their personal freedom, and will do their best to avoid it at all costs.

By the same logic, all government offices in Hungary stayed open during weekends throughout June 2022, to help the many citizens who had simply not been able to meet the deadline for renewing their expired identification documents due to the pandemic. Yet many Hungarians take it for granted that they will be attended to at government offices (and even medical clinics) without an

appointment. For them, it is part and parcel of freedom, experienced in the practical affairs of daily life. The picture would not be complete without mentioning the practice, proven for years, of mayor's offices staying open on the day general elections or a referendum are held. This means that any citizen who enters the booth only to realize that his or her identity card has expired can obtain new personal documents on the spot, naturally free of charge.

COVID POLICY

While Germany implemented a long-term lockdown in the wake of the second wave of the COVID pandemic in the autumn of 2020, Hungary decided to postpone this measure to the last minute. Even in November, Hungarians remained free to dine out or go see a play. Once it became inevitable, the lockdown took effect during the winter and lasted until April–May 2021. Since then, practically no restrictions have been enforced; even the mandatory mask requirement has been lifted. Starting from the spring of 2021, it would have been impossible in Hungary to maintain or even threaten with further long-term lockdowns, school closures, or a general policy of placing restrictions on the exercise of public activities. The citizens felt too worn-out and too eager to experience their freedom again. Hungarians were often at a loss to understand why countries like Germany decided to extend COVID-related restrictions for such a long time. They could hardly believe how lucky they were to live in a country where things had returned to normal.

CONCLUSIONS

Hungarians fight for their freedom much harder than it seems from a foreign vantage point. They tend to see each official decision and measure, domestic or international, first and foremost as an assault on their rights and

interests, which they must resist and fend off. By the same token, the country's political leaders view the conduct of international organizations as an infringement on Hungarian freedom more than anything else. The patterns and assumptions we inherited from the age of communism survive to this day, and find expression in a defensive stance toward measures imposed from above or from outside the country. Indeed, in recent years, the government has proceeded slowly and with great caution with its efforts to forge an equitable balance between individual interests and the public good, but in doing so has often come up against resistance and had to abandon specific plans. These domestic skirmishes, combined with the proverbial passionate vehemence of Hungarians, are misconstrued abroad as symptomatic of an autocratic power at work and of the struggle against it. It is in order therefore to correct such misinterpretations by appraising the deeper strata of the country's culture, differences of mentality, and the streak of diverging historical experience. It is only in this wider context that Hungarians' vital need for freedom can be properly understood. This thirst for freedom goes hand in hand with the notions of the current political elite in Hungary concerning the nature of the state and the nation from the perspective of the country's sovereignty. Freedom is to be defended at all costs: This is the credo to which ardent, freedom-loving Hungarians adhere.

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Translated by Péter Balikó Lengyel

NOTES

¹ <https://corvinak.hu/velemeny/2022/05/17/magyar-onkep-nemet-tukorben-1>, accessed 28 June 2022, or <https://corvinak.hu/velemeny/2021/09/20/gondolatok-a-magyarorszagrol-alkotott-keprol-nemetszagban-1990-2021>, accessed 28 June 2022.

² For more on Hungary as one of the most individualistic societies in Europe, see <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/czech-republic,hungary,poland,slovakia/>, accessed 28 June 2022.