



**Thomas von Ahn**

## Democracy or the street?

*Fragile stability in Hungary*

In September 2006, Hungary was shaken by a partly violent wave of demonstrations. The trigger was a speech by Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, in which he admitted knowingly playing down the national debt in the run-up to the elections. The protests against Gyurcsány and the austerity policy he introduced in summer 2006 marked the culmination of a conflict between political camps. The rightwing conservative camp, which has been in the opposition since 2002, increasingly seems to be calling the parliamentary system into question. The rift between the camps is exacerbated by disputes over the past that conceal fundamental differences in national politics. What follows is a summary of the German original.

The demonstrations in Budapest in September 2006 catapulted Hungary into the glare of the world press. "For fifteen years, the country, along with the other states in the Visegrád group, had served as a shining example of the transition to democracy and market liberalism. Now Hungary and the other Visegrád states appear to have regressed to a level characteristic not of Europe but of Ukraine and Georgia," wrote Thomas von Ahn in November. "What, then, has happened in Hungary, what are the causes of the current crisis, and how dangerous is it for the democratic political system?"

### From scandal speech to violent escalation

On 17 September, a speech made by Hungarian prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány to party members on 26 May, shortly after the victory of Gyurcsány's Magyar Szocialista Párt (Hungarian Socialist Party — MSZP) in the parliamentary elections, was leaked to the Hungarian press. In it, Gyurcsány admitted that in the run-up to the elections, the party had lied about the extent of the deficit in the domestic economy (which at the time lay at 10 per cent, the highest in the EU). The speech included the now notorious comment: "I almost died because I had to pretend for 18 months that we were governing. Instead, we lied morning, evening, and night." The speech created a scandal as much for its revelations as for the lurid language Gyurcsány employed.<sup>1</sup>

"Shortly before [the speech was made]," notes von Ahn, "the MSZP and the strongest opposition party, Fidesz (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége — Magyar Polgári Párt / Alliance of Young Democrats — Hungarian Civic Party), had been trying to outdo one another in election pledges. Fidesz had promised to lower social security contributions and the price of electricity as well as in the long term raising pensions; the MSZP had promised tax cuts." "Without doubt," continues von Ahn, "the goal of Gyurcsány's speech was to convince MPs to [...] break this spiral of lies. [...] The speech had an effect. [...] On 1

September, savings measures were passed, with the support of the MSZP's smaller coalition partner, the liberal SZDSZ (The Alliance of Free Democrats). [...] Of course, the government's popularity ratings dropped dramatically."

Critique

This article was criticized by György Schöpflin: [Democracy, populism, and the political crisis in Hungary](#).

Von Ahn notes that while there is some disagreement among experts about whether measures (including hikes in tax and fuel prices) were far-reaching enough or targeted appropriately, they are unanimous that: "Both the liberal coalition under Péter Medgyessy (2002–2004) and Ferenc Gyurcsány (2004–), as well as the previous government under the Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán (1998–2002), are responsible for the desolate state of the domestic economy. Since both camps denied each other any legitimacy whatsoever, they held all means — including election pledges beyond the fiscal potential of the country — for morally acceptable in order to win votes."

In late September, the campaign for the local elections on 1 October was entering its final stages. Orbán made much use in his campaign of the discrepancy between the election pledges and savings measures, even going so far as to announce that should the coalition government suffer a defeat in the local elections, it should be declared "illegitimate". "It was in this atmosphere that the speech was first leaked — given that it confirmed the election strategy of Fidesz, it can be supposed that they had been in possession of the tapes for some time and had leaked them to the press for tactical reasons," von Ahn comments.

On the same evening (17 September) a spontaneous demonstration took place outside parliament. The participants, according to von Ahn, were "primarily sympathizers of rightwing and far-Right groupings". The following evening, the number of demonstrators had risen to around 10 000. A cheer went up when it was announced that Fidesz had announced its solidarity with the demonstrators. Then the chairman of the far-Right organization *64 vármegye* (64 Counties Movement — the name refers to the former territory of Greater Hungary), László Toroczkai, called on the crowd to move to the nearby headquarters of the national television channel. The channel had shortly before turned down his request that it broadcast the demonstrators' demand for Gyurcsány's resignation. "Several hundred, partly known hooligans, broke off from the crowd and stormed the television building," writes von Ahn. "The police were powerless to intervene. [...] The rioting was filmed by the private television channel HírTV, which is close to the rightwing conservative camp. The commentator spoke of a 'revolutionary battleground'." This footage was broadcast simultaneously by the BBC. The following night violence escalated — this time the police intervened.

The MSZP suffered heavy losses in the local elections and on 6 October, Gyurcsány called for a vote of confidence in parliament. He won this with 207 votes to 165. While this secured his position, Gyurcsány had lost much confidence within his party and with the electorate. "That could cause him long-term problems in the implementation of his consolidation programme," writes von Ahn. "After all, he not only depends on his own camp [...] but also the backing of society."

The final phase in this succession of events came with the commemorative events around the anniversary of the 1956 revolution on 23 October. Fidesz declined to take part in the state ceremony and announced a separate memorial

event. Demonstrators refused to vacate Parliament Square for this occasion [and some famously commandeered a tank — ed.].

## The opposition

After the rioting, Fidesz continued to escalate its confrontation course, increasingly seeking proximity to extra-parliamentary protest, states von Ahn. "While Fidesz signed a cross-party declaration condemning the rioting on 18 September, it did not distance itself from the fascist and anti-Semitic utterances of some of the speakers on Parliament Square. Orbán was moving on the outermost periphery of what is compatible with the constitution when he delivered an ultimatum to the governing coalition following their heavy defeat in the local elections [...]. He called on Gyurcsány to resign within 72 hours; if this did not occur, Orbán would organize a large-scale rally on Parliament Square, which would last as long as it took for the prime minister to step down."

When the ultimatum's time limit had expired, on the day of the parliamentary vote of confidence, Orbán addressed 80 000 people on Parliament Square and announced the establishment of a charter called *Igen Magyarorszag* (Yes, Hungary), the aim of which was to "restore moral order". At the same time, Orbán rejected holding new elections. From 6 to 20 October, Fidesz politicians spoke daily on Parliament Square — in front of a gradually declining audience. Many experts in Hungary agree that with his behaviour, Orbán has run up against the boundaries of the parliamentary system. Von Ahn quotes József Debreczeni, a former advisor to Viktor Orbán (and now a fierce critic — ed.), as saying: "Viktor Orbán is obviously and for the umpteenth time not in a position to accept the results of the free elections (the parliamentary elections of April to May 2006) and the resultant constellation of power. On top of this, since 2002, his policies have been aimed at throwing into question and weakening the basis and the framework of the parliamentary system — what's more, increasingly systematically and dangerously. And on the basis of the past days and weeks, I even have to say: in the most extreme case, doing away with them altogether."

Von Ahn calls this ultimatum and the subsequent rallies "the climax of Orbán's 'anti-parliamentary strategy'". "Since his election defeat in 2002, he has consciously and repeatedly mobilized large numbers of people, thus causing a political escalation. In doing so, he repeatedly allowed himself to rub shoulders with the radical Right. The results of the local elections showed that this strategy worked."

"Nevertheless, events since 17 September 2006 show that it is not Orbán's intention to do away with the parliamentary system. It is unlikely that Orbán will place himself at the forefront of a 'coloured revolution' and openly call for breaking with the constitution. It is equally unlikely that Orbán will attempt via means still sanctioned by the constitution, for example strikes, to prompt the coalition parties to give in to pressure and remove their trust from Gyurcsány." Orbán's strategy is thus still a balancing act, concludes von Ahn. On one hand, he caters to his clientele, which includes the far-Right. On the other hand, he behaves pragmatically: "We need a national unity presided over by a technocratic government of experts. We don't want new elections, since it would take four months until we have a new government." (Orbán in interview in *Der Standard*, 21.10.2006.)

## The demonstrators

"The demonstrators on Parliament Square belong in the broadest possible sense to the camp that Orbán wants to reach with his populist politics. Their hard core is recruited from far-Right and fascist groups, whose roots partly extend to the so-called 'Citizens' circles', the establishment of which Orbán called for following his defeat in the parliamentary elections in 2002. Among these are the far-Right organization *Jobbik* and the youth wing of the 64 Counties Movement, which see in Hungary's EU membership renewed subordination to foreign rule and which dream of a return to the former boundaries of the Hungarian kingdom. These groupings operate independently and do not see themselves as organizations operating under Orbán's wing. However, Fidesz has never unequivocally distanced itself from them.

"The violent element of the demonstrators was overwhelmingly among the losers of the system change and globalization. They come from social classes with little access to education. Their parents' generation, which is also represented among the demonstrators, performed during the Kádár era mostly unskilled labour, living in 'dignified poverty' and relative security. Contrary to expectations, the system change left these families in greater poverty and insecurity, so that after 1989 they were quickly pushed to the edges of society and the labour market. The socially neglected offspring of this generation have poor prospects: 30 per cent become permanently unemployed after finishing education, a further 40 per cent must search for new employment every half year and fall through the social security net. Because these young people yearn for community and belonging, they are easily mobilized by political demagoguery and spectacular symbolism.

"The violent demonstrators should be distinguished from those who demonstrate peacefully. On the one hand, this group includes the generation of parents mentioned above. On the other, it draws its members from the middle class. The motive for their involvement is a deep-seated revulsion at the liberal-Left camp. This often feeds upon genuinely suffered injustice, which they or their families had to tolerate during the Stalinist period or afterwards. The MSZP today is considered to be the immediate inheritor of the Communist Party. The MSZP is lying if it denies this; Gyurcsány's admission to lying confirms this dishonesty. "Along with people 'damaged by communism' is a group whose members expected that the system change of 1989 would bring with it far-reaching national political change. Above all, these people accuse the liberal-Left camp of having neglected the Hungary that lay beyond today's borders, of failing to treat the minority problem [i.e. the problem of Hungarian minorities outside Hungary — ed.] as a question of the 'unity of the Hungarian nation', but rather as a purely bilateral and cultural political problem."

Von Ahn concludes: "The fact that Gyurcsány had announced savings measures that would require a considerable amount from the people continued to remain in the background of the debate. At any rate, there was little in the way of concrete protest about far-reaching measures in the Hungarian social system. Just as little could be heard from the moderate majority in Hungary, which avoided the danger of open confrontation on the street."

### **Historical dimensions**

"In view of the confrontational political culture in Hungary, one gets the impression that, despite its stability, the democratic political system in place since 1989 does not rest upon broad political consensus," writes von Ahn. "This has something to do with the political system change of 1989-90 and its meaning for the legitimation of the new system. The system change in

Hungary did not mobilize large sectors of the population. For that reason, no sustainable or overarching political identity arose from it. The battle between the political parties for the post-socialist symbolic order is thus particularly hard-fought. Some observers fear that the fight for interpretive superiority could lead to there being a leftwing, a liberal, a moderate conservative, and a far-Right interpretation of the system change and that the threat could arise that the system change was ultimately a party-political project."

To summarize von Ahn: So that party politics could be legitimated at all, and to create identification with it, politicians of every stripe sought and still seek other ways and means of mobilizing the public. At the centre of their mobilization discourse stands national culture, national identity and belonging, and above all history and the past. These are thematized in the context of, and in connection to, contemporary politics. This instrumentalization makes a consensus-oriented memory of the past impossible, since narratives about the past are, according to party loyalty, varied. This leads to a divided culture of memory. The attitude to two major events of Hungarian twentieth-century history exemplify the contemporary dichotomy between the political camps.

### ***Trianon***

The Treaty of Trianon in 1920 redrew the boundaries of the pre-war Austro-Hungarian Empire, leaving a third of Magyars (approximately 3 million people) outside the new Hungarian borders. Today, the largest Hungarian minorities are in Romania and Slovakia. Von Ahn summarizes the legacy of Trianon as follows:

"The failure of the various political systems in Hungary in the past century goes hand-in-hand with the failure of their respective ideology of integration. The policy that sought a reinstatement of the former national borders failed because a prerequisite was joining forces with the Third Reich. The hope that a 'Socialist International' would dissolve nationalism as such proved itself to be deceptive. In the late 1980s, the well-being of Hungarian minorities became a central concern of the Hungarian opposition movement. However, at the time of the system change, no one had a model for a minority or neighbourhood policy. Thus, the 'national question' became a central point of ideological conflict in the new, democratic Hungary. [...] Today, the political conflict over the so-called 'status law' [including funding educational facilities for Hungarian minorities and giving them privileged access to the Hungarian labour market — ed], or the referendum on double nationality for ethnic Hungarians outside Hungary, shows that a minority policy based on an ethnically influenced concept of the Hungarian nation is compatible neither with the policies of the neighbouring states nor with the law as understood by Brussels.

"The fact that such a law came to pass [during Viktor Orbán's tenure as prime minister in 2001] shows that, with the blurred distinction between ethnicity and nationality, the 'Trianon trauma' can be instrumentalized among broad sections of the Hungarian population. So long as this complex is not treated, it will remain virulent and thus susceptible to politicization — even if in the current crisis, only the far-Right complain of injured national identity." The liberal-Left camp, von Ahn adds, "tends to see the solution of the minorities problem in the European integration of the entire region and in good relations with neighbouring countries. It tends to avoid coming to grips with the 'Trianon trauma' as a social problem."

1956

"Hungarian society has also been unable to reach a consensus over the 1956 revolution, which can be evaluated as a failed attempt to impose national sovereignty over the Soviet occupation. This is evidenced not least by the varying terms used to remember the events of autumn 1956. Sometimes talk is of *népfelkelés* (uprising), sometimes of *szabadságharc* (liberation struggle), sometimes *forradalom* (revolution). These concepts reflect various views of the revolution, either foregrounding the national character of the events ("uprising", "liberation struggle") or the social aspect of the protest movement ("revolution"). The most that can be said is that there is consensus that it was not a counter–revolution, the Kádár regime's term for it. Thus 1956 has positive associations for all the political parties, since the recognition of it as an exceptionally important national event is closely linked to the end of the socialist era. For this reason, the political parties attempt to instrumentalize the memory of '1956' and to represent the events in a way that implies that they are the legitimate heirs to the revolution. In the process, individual personalities, events, or aspects of the revolution are one–sidedly emphasized, while others are suppressed.

"Thus, the rightwing conservative camp emphasizes that it was a national uprising against a communist occupying force. This interpretation allows analogies to be drawn with the contemporary situation, whereby the MSZP are positioned as the direct successors of the Communist Party. According to this version, it is once again the communists that are harming the nation — in the form of savings packages and political lies. It is this short circuit that led the far–Right to believe that a '2006 revolution' was justified. In the process, the socialist implications of the 1956 revolution (workers' councils), as well as the fact that the Gyurcsány regime was legitimated through free elections, were blocked out. The socialist camp, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of the reform communists, especially that of the subsequently executed Imre Nagy. However, it neglects to enter into a conscientious engagement with the role of its predecessor party in the quashing of the revolution."

Von Ahn concludes: "Whether such an inflammatory and hysterical political culture can become so self–evident as to jeopardize democratic consensus in the country has yet to be proved. Up until now, however, the strategy of the opposition leader Viktor Orbán leads one to conclude that he is interested in maintaining permanent confrontation. After the liberal–Left camp refused to take up the glove, an escalation in the sense of a 'coloured revolution' remains out of the question. Nevertheless, in this situation it cannot be assumed that a plural political culture will be able to develop in the near future."

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<sup>1</sup> For a transcript of the speech, see [Wikipedia](#).