

Péter Kende's Speech

In addressing this conference, I feel slightly nonplussed for two reasons: first, unlike all previous speakers, I have not brought any written material; and second, I was unaware that 1956 was among the topics to be discussed. As regards the latter, I am disinclined to speak on the subject: I have just finished a book, on which I had labored for quite some time,¹ and I would first like to see what kind of reception my work gets. As for the topic “What Was This?”, my view is that the historical past is relevant to recent events only to the extent that the events of this autumn had been a demonstration of how the Hungarian population view 1956 today.

So I shall start with this. In what follows, I shall briefly touch on two more issues: i) How did the recent event in Hungary react *back* to the collective perception of 1956? ii) Can the ongoing political crisis, which started in September, be seen as a crisis of the system, and if so, in what sense?

ooo

When I ask the question “What do our Hungarian contemporaries think of 1956?”, I do not, of course, have the professional historians' view in mind. Nor do I think of the opinions of the people, for whom 1956 was a personal matter. (I am one of them, along with thousands of other Hungarians both within and without Hungary, all of whom are now getting on a bit, with the youngest being in their sixties.) The target population I have in mind is constituted by those young or middle-aged “ordinary Hungarians”, who have heard or read very little about 1956 and whose political involvement ends at exercising their voting right.

Well, these imaginary creatures – of whom we nevertheless have some hazy notion, thanks to the opinion polls – had, and still have, only a rather rough idea of 1956, as seen through the eyes of a subordinate. What I mean by this is that – almost irrespective of what they know or conjecture about this event – they believe that the truth about is basically *political*. “Until now we had to believe in one thing, from now on we shall have to believe in another one,” this Hungarian said in 1989. And he would still have thought something similar, had not the events of this year been

copied over this – usually not very exciting (because it belongs to the realm of official politics) – picture. It would be still much too early to guess what picture this “ordinary Hungarian” will have about 1956 after this autumn. One thing is certain, however: the events of 2006 will have left a mark on this picture.ⁱⁱ

The above-described plasticity of 1956 results from a sad predicament that the Hungarian public experienced after the fall of the revolution, when they had no simple and unobstructed way of studying the memories they had personally gathered in the revolution. When you have an event that you cannot discuss frankly, without any political justifications for 30 years (not even within the family), then that event cannot become a national tradition. Such a process could only take place in the communities of Hungarian émigrés. For the majority of those who stayed home, the uncertainties reached such an absurd level that they became unsure what it was exactly that they wanted to study. As I indicated in my book, I agree with those who think that the great national unity of 1956 was only the reality of a single moment, and it ceased as soon as that moment had passed. Beginning with the autumn of 1956, the civil war aspects of the event came to the fore. There is no need to be touchy about this, as the things that the revolution brought with it produced adversaries not only in Moscow, but also within the Hungarian society. During the heady days of the fighting these adversaries were usually too timid to manifest themselves, but once the revolution was over, they very quickly found each other, not only due to their political opportunism, but also because they *had* something to lose.

In this sense it is justified to take a second look at the claim that the entire Hungarian society rallied around the demands of 1956 as one person. Although this claim is politically defensible, and also makes a nice historical tableau, it does not tally with the socio-historical facts. But even if the claim had briefly stood at the time, the idea that “1956 was a shared national value” was squandered away right from the early years of the Kádár era, and the damage could not be undone after the changes in 1989. And the “anniversaries” of the past 15 years only exacerbated the decay that characterized the after-life of the revolution.

And this conveniently leads us to our next topic, which is related to the *reactions* of the events of this autumn. As I have already mentioned it earlier, the stormy incidents

of autumn 2006 were somehow copied over the events, which had taken place fifty years ago, in the heads of a great many people. With opposite signs, but the same holds true for both those who approved of the “uprising” of autumn 2006 and those who saw in it the sad and disgraceful parody of 1956. Somehow no one could dispel the blasphemous thought that in every street disturbance people of a certain mentality always assume the lead. In this sense, there is *some kind of a parallel* between the two events, which are in other respect so very different. This disturbing thought, which blurs the dividing line between rowdy behavior and revolution, was reinforced by the powerful images shown on television, and also by the puzzled look on the face of the foreign correspondents rushing to the scene, whose bewilderment soon gave way to their curiosity to find a *political* explanation.

At the same time it also became clear that a large part of the protestors – probably the majority of them – were aware of the somewhat farcical character (more precisely, party mood) of the “revolution” they staged against the socialist/liberal government: in any event, that was what their party spirit suggested. In the name of “direct democracy”, they took over the most sacred public space, while consuming large quantities of frankfurter and beer. And while the majority of the public watched with fear and amazement the “unfortunate events” that unexpectedly developed, the situation had a paradoxical consequence: *no one was bored*. One thing can be said with certainty: without the excitement of this anti-government happening, the jubilee celebrations would have been met with complete apathy, on the part of right-wingers, left-wingers and non-partisans alike. Frankly speaking, this became the fate of all the official programs, while the endlessly repeated anniversary celebration poured on newsreaders, radio listeners and television audience inevitably produced a certain amount of fatigue...

In this regard, we should accept the conclusion that for the past 16 years the anniversary celebrations of 1956 have gone sour because of the officialdom that now surrounds it, and which the “ordinary Hungarians” loath so much. And ever since we came to have *three* official anniversary celebrations – in complete harmony with other instances of national delusion in Hungary –, all similarly over-eulogized, people’s enthusiasm to identify with the causes they represent reached rock bottom. In the case of August 20, the lack of enthusiasm is gratefully concealed by the general interest in

the fireworks, but when it comes to the March and the October events, there is nothing to boost up interest. At the same time, the impertinence of the political players to exploit the occasions for actual political gains – despite the distance and the factual consensus – have started to undermine the cause of the March youth...

ooo

I would like to say a few words about the possibility of a “system crisis”. If the expression refers to the breakdown of the constitutional order, then – in my opinion – the present situation does not qualify for such a description. But if it refers to the extreme antagonism between the two great political blocs, and also to the fact that this polarization has now produced consequences that are verging on the absurd, then the situation answers to that description. The big question remains, however, whether the political establishment is in crisis or it is only one of the actors who wants to put the other actor into an impossible situation by continuous aggravation. In the latter case the deadlock results not from an objective circumstance but from deliberate calculation linked to a concrete situation and it cannot be taken for granted that the political actor concerned would not change his assessment of the situation. (Naturally, if the current situation prevails for much longer, and if no one is able to neutralize the politician who excels in disregarding the rules, then we obviously have a “crisis”.)

I, for one, can see signs of a crisis in two entirely different areas: one is the growing discontent about the costs of living, and the other is the coalition parties’ faltering. Although the first one of these two problems was not caused by the autumn incidents, it was nevertheless thrown into relief by them; the second on the other hand is linked to the celebrations of the round anniversary through channels that are partly evident and partly unclear.

The discontent around the costs of living, together with its interconnections with the austerity measures announced in 2006, requires no further commentary, although one could point out that the broad social sympathy, which made the handling of the protests on Kossuth Square so difficult (and also explained the protraction of the protests), could not have emerged, if such an interconnection had not existed. But this

has already taken us to the second – and much more complex – problem: the faltering of the coalition partners.

As the autumn of 2006 approached, the more militant leaders of the Hungarian right wing (not just Viktor Orbán, but a much wider circle) shrewdly came to realize that for the recently reelected HSP the upcoming round anniversary presented a very sensitive topic. Ever since they made the transition from renegade Leninists to modern and enthusiastic social democrats, i.e. since 1989, they have been unable to clarify their position about this most important date in Hungarian history. The reasons are more or less clear: in order to do that, they first would have had to denounce the Kádár era, the decades that their core supporters still regard as the golden age. Gyula Horn's successes as party leader had, to a considerable extent, been based on this recognition and on the clever exploitation of this circumstance. But the strange thing is that the HSP failed to tackle this problem even after Horn's ejection from power. In my opinion, this failure was the one that landed the socialists in their present precarious situation, and what makes it even worse, now they can run after this missed train and it is far from certain that they will ever catch up with it. (Let me make it absolutely clear: when I talk about the HSP's relations to the Kádár regime, I mean *breaking with their past* rather than *explaining their past*. In my opinion, the current leaders of the HSP have no problem explaining what they were doing during the Kádár years; their problem lies in *how they saw the world* back then. Most of the people who did have to *explain their past actions* have disappeared from the stage by now.)

In what sense could this “explanation deficit” foment the current crisis of legitimacy? Naturally, I do not suggest that the people in authority should be entitled to holding their office. I refer to a much hazier sense: they are not quite certain of what they are doing. Precisely in connection with 1956 (which is still a national affair, or at least a state celebration!), they do not know how to speak without landing themselves in dire contradiction with their old outlook on the world – almost independently of the point whether somebody cares to rub their noses into this. I hasten to point out that this problem is not exclusive to the left: many of the so-called civic personalities put on the stage by the right, along with most of the right-wing journalists, also have of skeletons in their wardrobe. (The Alliance of Free Democrats is the least affected by

this problem.) What is exclusive to the left is the fact that it lands them in controversy. In the thinking of the Hungarian right wing, self-contradiction and a lack of coherence between adjacent statements have never caused any problem, and even less have they led to a moral crisis. Or at least that is my impression.

The underlying crisis of legitimacy of the left wing, which I have attempted to outline in the above, also has a paradoxical side to it: it came precisely at the time when the left wing finally had a leader in the person of Ferenc Gyurcsány, *who broke with his predecessors' tradition* and tried to face up to his party's Kádarian past, deeming it necessary to distance both himself and his party from it. And he did that in the name of those (democratic) political values, which had decorated the HSP's frontispiece since 1989, without actually leading to a clear denunciation of Kádár's dictatorial regime, with a special regard to the post-1956 period. In other words: their opponents launched a massive attack on the Hungarian socialists for the latter's role in the crushing of the 1956 revolution precisely at the moment when the socialists themselves finally came around to facing up to their past...

Someone could counter my argument (and quite rightly, actually) by pointing out that the rough-and-ready troops flexing their muscles on Kossuth Square are blissfully unaware of all this. Well, it is precisely here that the FIDESZ leadership enters the picture. Contrary to public opinion – or at least a belief shared by many –, I do not think that the infamous Öszöd speech prompted the FIDESZ to change course in domestic politics. The speech, or its leaking, only provided an excellent opportunity for putting a previously concocted plan – making the situation of the recently reelected prime minister's situation impossible – into the practice of daily politics. In addition to the personal frustration that Viktor Orbán felt after losing at the polls yet again, and on top of a Gyurcsány-phobia of almost epic proportions that he developed consequently, the FIDESZ leadership had a more important motive: it was the consideration – actually, an entirely rational one – that with Gyurcsány at the helm, the HSP *could become* a much more dangerous, and lot less vulnerable, opponent. Therefore, they wanted to do everything in their power to unseat this dangerous politician and to keep the HSP in the ideologically highly uncomfortable position, which the earlier leadership, from Horn to László Kovács, had established for them.

In my opinion, that was the most important factor in the background of the events that took place in Hungary since September.

ooo

Finally, I would like to make one last comment. All the observers of the autumn events have drawn attention to the contrast between the parliamentary arithmetic and the balance of power on the streets. (With regard to the latter, I refer to the greater readiness of right-wing masses to demonstrate.) The sympathizers of the left wing, who theoretically form an equally large group, not only failed to take to the streets to “counter-demonstrate”, but they *sank in complete passivity* instead, watching almost spellbound what the fascistic extremists, along with the right-wing core apparently sympathetic to them, were doing on the streets.

It would be possible to interpret this passivity as a manifestation of the above mentioned “underlying legitimacy crisis”. However, the question would remain whether only this confusion was manifested in it. Is it not possible that it also reflects the recognition of the socio-political fact that (as it already happened so many times in the past century) once again *it is the right-wing population that forms the “emotional majority” in Hungary?*

Our knowledge in this regard has been clouded by the circumstance that during the “short 20th century”ⁱⁱⁱ the masses that ruled Hungary’s public spaces – and especially the streets of Budapest – most often and for the longest periods were organized by the Communists (1919, 1945-56, 1957-1988). This possession of the public spaces was, however, an artificially manufactured domination, the type of street rule that is not backed up by deep public emotions. If we were to look deeper under the surface, then we would come to the conclusion that between 1920 and 1948 the right-wing ideologies always had a larger mass of potential supporters, as well as more virulent backing, than did either the socialists or the communists. In this regard we know nothing about 1956. And as for the period passed since 1989, the Hungarian political society (now organized freely and getting its voice heard even more freely) has existed in the state of permanent change. Could it be that the events of autumn 2006 signaled the return of the earlier balance of power?

Notes

ⁱ Péter Kende: *Eltékozolt forradalom?* (Revolution Squandered?), Új Mandátum Kiadó, Budapest, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Péter György described the situation very succinctly in a brief study (“A puszta ország” (The Barren Country), *ÉS*, December 22, 2006.), when he wrote that “*the myth of the revolution has suffered irreversible damage, and has become largely inapposite*” as a result of the events taking place in Budapest this year.

ⁱⁱⁱ By the “short 20th century” I mean the period from 1914 through 1989.