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## **What happened to you, Hungary?**

There are more and more people asking how did we manage to make such a mess of it all? Why did we fail to retain and capitalise on the initial advantage and positive evaluation that this country had at the outset?

Back in 1990 this country was seen as the most promising East of the Elba. After the *annus mirabilis* we were expected to set an example for the other countries in transition. Barely two decades have passed and already there are more and more people asking how did we manage to make such a mess of it all? Why did we fail to retain and capitalise on the initial advantage and positive evaluation that this country had at the outset?

The deterioration itself was neither sudden nor unexpected – but facing up to it was something we kept putting off as long as we could. To be sure, there have been and still are people who rang the alarm, but their voices were not strong enough and they did not crystallise into a coherent critique that lead to a wider social discussion of solutions. This is primarily a symptom of the weakness of civil society and the fact that the media here is unsuited for public service. Hungarian society and the political and economic elite who now have a democratic mandate to lead us are unprepared for European integration. In every field where this was possible they carried on where the party state had left off. Regrettably, there were many areas where this proved feasible. This way they found few valid answers to the problems of globalisation – the ineptitude and passivity of the media and the political class did not help to answer the challenges of globalisation through open public debate. Faced with a jumbled mess of phenomena around European integration, disintegration and globalisation, various disintegrated segments of Hungarian society feel helpless, baffled, increasingly frustrated, and are sometimes filled with shame and other times with hatred.

The only exception is constituted by a narrow economic and financial elite, which has so far shown little interest in solving the problems that affect the wider society. Clearly they have not come to appreciate how crucial, indeed, inevitable, it is to take social responsibility, even though this is becoming an ever more inalienable part of the day-to-day activity of any self-respecting multi-national company. The thought of partnership between the Prince, the Merchant and the Citizen has failed to touch the Hungarian political and economic class to any significant depth.

In any place where the rift between the external, institutional forms of democracy and its inherent content is permanent and still growing, democracy is in crisis. This is the kind of situation that has arisen in today's Hungary. The most evident symptoms for this are the following. An increasing proportion of people, citizens of the Republic of Hungary, think that the operation of democratic institutions does not serve their interests. Consequently they do not trust these institutions, nor the politicians who directly operate and control them. As a further consequence, they do not participate, nor wish to participate, in the public debates and actions. They think that, apart from a very few exceptions, members of the political class are

motivated by financial greed and power interests and that they, the citizens, do not have the power or the means to influence them. A growing proportion of citizens of the Hungarian Republic either view the present form of democracy with fear or are unable to identify with it – their sense is one of *being abandoned*. This is a fear of freedom and, at the same time, of poverty, which we might term a *freedom-poverty syndrome*.

Even if the sense of accumulating loss is not conscious on a day-to-day basis, it is there as a lurking but permanent sense of frustration, doing its harmful work in the collective subconscious of society. Beyond the sense of being abandoned, Hungarian society feels trapped. They are frustrated by a self-destructive sense of helplessness and their aggression and apathy are only enhanced by the fact that they see no way out of the present situation in the near or distant future.

The sense of cohesion is at an absolute ebb in our society today. Besides the fact that the middle-class is powerless and well-nigh nonexistent, this weakness has many other components, but two of them tower above all the others. As the gates of freedom open wider and the challenges of globalisation and European integration shed light on the truth, the *lack of knowledge and competence* appears more shocking than ever, as does *the lack of a sense of responsibility that should flow from belonging to a community*. In other words, besides a *democratic deficit we now have to reckon with an intellectual and a moral deficit, too*. Since the act of looking in the mirror did not take place at the moment of political transition, *Hungarian society has not had an experience of democracy and freedom associated with 1989*.

If a society is unable to imagine that it could break out from a situation which is detrimental to it, it may never escape. For such a ‘vision’ to come true, society must be able to visualise itself as a political community. Without this vision it cannot successfully embrace *res publica*, that is, public good.

A country which loses its intellectual capital and its culture is set on a course towards obscurity and loss of self-confidence. *One of the most important elements in the therapy of a sick society is to restore the prestige, the infrastructure and wide accessibility to knowledge and learning. If a country does not value its human treasure, that treasure will disappear. Before radical reforms, here, too, we need a radical change in attitude.*

After squarely facing the status quo and drawing the resulting conclusions, as well as appreciating and enriching our human treasure, a third, crucial element of therapy is to *face up to the past*. Unless this takes place, there is little chance that the age-old psychological reflexes of division will ever be resolved or that trust will be restored within society. And without a stock of mutual trust there is no civil democracy and no co-operation.

Perhaps the most worrying organic malady of this society is that over the past twenty years, when it was no longer impeded by external forces, it remained unable to adapt effectively to global or European patterns; it failed to adopt the guiding principle of openness, many-sided partnership and co-operation, the organising principles of networks and decentralisation. This shortcoming was already noticeable during the long decade of accession but became particularly grotesque after this step was taken. It is beginning to appear as if we were tying our long-term future to an organisation whose operation, goals and most exciting opportunities do not really affect or interest us at all. The most extreme and harmful example

was when we failed to replace the thousand-year-old county system with regions as genuine administrative units that would expand democracy and decentralisation.

Instead of correctly appraising and taking advantage of the opportunities for development and improvement offered by globalisation and European integration, as Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden, Spain and Portugal did and continue to do (once the Northern, Southern and Eastern peripheries of the European centre), this country tends to see itself as the victim of these two robust processes. This failure is due not so much to technical shortcomings such as poor communication, shortage of information or the difficulty with speaking foreign languages etc., but to a false and archaic national self-image or national pride which has its eyes turned toward the past, chasing the chimeras of this past in the present, while connection with the reality of everyday life becomes daily more atrophied and one-dimensional.

On the other side, *we look in vain for a new, future-oriented sense of community which could lend a positive charge to the changes that are inevitable* and which could replace its obsolete counterpart without major psychological damage or moral disaster.

In the 21st century the central principles informing social organisation and governance are *network and collateral organisation*, permanent flow, the integration of a growing number of people in local, regional and supranational decision-making processes. Without understanding and applying the principles of mutual reliance, of interdependence, it is impossible to break out of the present situation. If we really want to have a country here, we need to accept, understand and learn to apply these principles. Paradoxically, this is the only way in which we can preserve and present our own, innermost culture, values and traditions.

This may well be the heaviest price and the price most difficult to pay for the years lost, for our ever-growing ineptitude and the resulting tensions and failures. To break with the paternalistic and servile traditions of Kádárism and other, earlier forms of feudalism, to stop the habit of placing short-term individual self-interest above all else and protecting it to the death, to break our resistance to long-term thinking in broad perspectives ('what's the point, we're not the ones to decide anyway'), to break with the culture of unreliability, miscommunication, false facades and deliberate suppression of achievement – these are all tasks waiting to be done. We will not get very far with the stowaway mentality of 'we'll survive this, too, somehow, like we survived all the others' and we will certainly not come closer to the cutting edge of Europe or, what's more important, to our own bravest expectations. What it does lead to is the emergence of a lasting divide within the EU of centre and periphery, to permanent dependence and subordination. This way we are marking out our own long-term position.

If we want to step outside the vicious circle of growing uncertainty, paralysing fear of the future, ebbing self-confidence and the search for scape-goats, we must rebuild networks of trust and co-operation. For this it is important to recognise that the paths we have taken are unviable. To re-formulate our notion of the common good and to recognise the importance of working together in pursuit of it must come from ourselves, not from some source above or outside of us. Unless Hungarian society and the numerous little sub-societies, civil and professional communities that function within it, face up to our present condition and become mobilised, all types of therapy and self-therapy remain a dead letter or mere daydreaming.

The relationships of the Merchant, the Prince and the Citizen, as well as of the 'great magician' who stands between them – the media – also need to be reconsidered and

reformulated. This is a challenge which urgently demands answers on all levels of governance, economic and social life alike. This must be done in local communities, on the regional, the European and the global level alike. If we wish to become successful in the supra-national arena, which is becoming increasingly dominant, we need to be able to reformulate our relations, make them more dynamic and elaborate new rules by which the game is played in the Hungarian arena.

Nearly twenty years after the political transition *we now need a new social contract* and must lay down the ethical, political, institutional and intellectual foundations of 21st century democracy. There is no chance for democracy unless it is built from below. For this it is inevitable that certain changes take place in the attitudes, consciousness and behaviour of society. First of all, we need debate, a thorough consideration of our common affairs, the forms and frames and the open search for consensus. This increases self-esteem. It is a time-consuming process, particularly now since our accumulating troubles and maladies have been left untreated for so long. After becoming critically and consciously aware of what needs to be done, we have to get down to the business of self-therapy.