

## **Gregorz Gorny Budapest today, Prague tomorrow...**

### **Polish journalist' view:**

For some time now, Hungary has been on the receiving end of advice and threats from a variety of politicians and organizations in the European Union. The question is what has motivated all this? The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has become “Public Enemy Number One” in the eyes of the Europe’s political-financial and left-wing elites. In trying to find the causes of the turmoil that has engulfed Hungary, one can only agree with the conclusions of Bohumil Doležal, who wrote in a commentary in a recent edition of Lidové Novotny (Czech newspaper) that the sanctions against Hungary have been “politically motivated by the displeasure of Brussels vis-à-vis the Hungarian constitution”, and this attitude deserves more detailed attention. The fact that the Orbán government is pursuing independent policies that focus on national interests has disturbed certain supra-national entities. First among these groups have been the banks, large telecommunication, energy and commercial enterprises, all beholden to Western financial interests, which were obliged to pay a temporary crisis tax to the Hungarian treasury. The Polish press has reported an informal meeting of Western ambassadors in Budapest to discuss how they could collectively strike at the Orbán government to reverse this, from their perspective, unfavourable policy. The second group that is upset is the European Left, both in its “old” and “new” manifestations. The “old left” does not like the fact that the Orbán government has prosecuted some individuals who have committed serious offenses during the communist era, while the “new left” is horrified that the new Hungarian constitution has given primacy to Christian values and historic traditions. Finally, the last group to be upset is made up the Euro-bureaucrats, who have their own ideologically motivated project to organize the Union along a top-down, dirigiste model. Thus the independent policies pursued by the Hungarian leader have led to an inevitable clash with these groups in Brussels.

### **Hungary tried and convicted!**

These groups, international capital, left-wing parties and the Euro-bureaucracy have vast clout in European political, media and financial circles, which makes it unsurprising that they have collectively acclaimed Mr.Orbán as the greatest threat to European harmony and democracy. The new Hungarian Constitution, which has replaced the old Stalinist one, embodies this challenge in their eyes.

The culmination of these attacks occurred during a session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg earlier this year, on January 18<sup>th</sup>. As the negotiations began, it became clear that the analysis of the constitution did not unearth anything illegal. Brussels objected to two minor related issues, namely, the proposed retirement age of judges and the status of the controller of government data. In fact, Mr.Orban had signalled that he was open to modifications on these points.

Yet the MEP's tried to overwhelm the Hungarian government without specifying any objections other than vague generalizations. The socialist MEP, Hannes Swoboda, proclaimed, that "We are not condemning specific items, but the underlying spirit (of the constitution)". In a similar vein, liberal Guy Verhofstadt pointed out that "I don't believe that problem lies in one or two sections (of the constitution), but its whole philosophy, hidden below the surface". Green party member, Daniel Cohn-Bendit was complaining about the whole atmosphere in Hungary, where the homeless, intellectuals, Jews and minorities live in fear, which, according to him, is the consequence of the "spirit of the constitution". In other words, they attacked the "atmosphere", the "spirit" and the "philosophy" without raising a single concrete objection.

Krisztina Morvai, MEP of the Jobbik (a right wing opposition party) made the following comment: "Hungary is not the cause of the present crisis in Europe. You are the causes, because of the decisions that you have made that led to the pauperization of several countries. Is it not strange, that, of all people, you are preaching about democracy? Whom do you represent? Did the impoverished Greeks or Portuguese really send you here to concern yourselves with the pensions of Hungarian judges or the status of the individual who oversees government data( in Hungary)?"

### **Debate about the limits of independence**

Orban left the confrontation in Strasbourg with his head high, satisfied that his opponents could not raise a single issue concerning the threat to democracy. Yet, almost immediately, another attack followed. The European Commission proposed that a grant of 495 million euros from the cohesion fund for Hungary should be frozen in 2013. Ollie Rehn, the "commissar" in charge of the financial and economic portfolio, justified this decision by commenting that he did not think that the Hungarian government had taken adequate steps to decrease the government deficit permanently below 3%. To consider taking such a radical step against a member country of the European Union is unprecedented in its history.

Why was Hungary singled out when as many as twenty states have government deficits higher than 3%? Why is Spain judged differently from Hungary? Orban described the decision in Brussels as “completely unrealistic”, and posed the following question: “Why do you want to take money away from us, when cash is poured out in other directions? Why now, when the government is decreasing its debt, is the Union trying to punish the Hungarian population for the irresponsible decisions made by the previous regime?”

The answer, it seems, is simple: the issue of the government deficit is a mere smoke-screen; the real reason is that Orban’s policies are not deemed correct from the perspective of the European elite. The whole “Hungarian affair” is really about the limits of how far member states are allowed to pursue their own policies. It is about whether the larger players, Berlin or Paris are free to pursue their national interest, while the medium-sized countries: Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czechs have to wait in line to see if they have permission to find their own political solutions.

Through financial coercion the Union is attempting force decisions on Budapest that are unacceptable to the Hungarian government and the population. Such pressure could well be applied in the future against Poland or the Czech Republic, should Brussels find the decisions of their governments or sovereign parliaments not to its liking.

Petr Necas has shown that he understood the dangers of this scenario when he defended Hungary against the European Commission. He is fully aware that what is at stake is the right of member countries for self-determination within the Union. And this affects not just Hungary, but all the other member states as well. Today the pressure is on Budapest, tomorrow it may well be on Prague!

Translated by Istvan Hegedus, Toronto, Canada