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Hungary's Reboot

By ZOLTAN KOVACS

Even in times of peace and normality, it is sometimes desirable to update or entirely reboot the system we live in. In times of crisis, it becomes a necessity. We currently face such a moment in Hungary. That is why we are acting decisively to reconfigure our institutional and economic infrastructure to equip us for the difficult challenges of 2012 and beyond.

The Hungarian government enacted a string of new laws before our new constitution took effect on Jan. 1. Some have proved controversial, not least the new laws to define the composition of the central bank, reform our electoral system and define what constitutes a church. Our detractors allege that these measures amount to a power grab by the government. Leaving aside the fact that similar structures and controls exist in other EU countries, this entirely misses the point.

On the economy, we make no excuse for acting decisively to clean up the mess left behind by the previous administration, or for trying to prevent it from happening again. Nor, as is sometimes suggested, are we setting out to upset relations with our international and European partners, whose support we greatly value.

Like other governments across Europe, we are simply acting in the national interest, as a matter of urgency, to safeguard the economic future of our citizens at a moment of crisis. This involves tough decisions, as it does for every EU member state. Half-measures won't cut it.

Between 2002 and 2010, two consecutive socialist-liberal governments drove the country to the brink of economic and moral collapse. They operated a corrupt and rotten system disguised as a Western-style democracy. The effect was that, when the current Hungarian government was elected with a two-thirds majority a year and a half ago, there was precious little that did not need fixing.

Our clear mandate has been to end the uncertainties that have prevailed in Hungary since 1989—in effect, to draw a line under the post-communist period and bring Hungary within the orbit of the new Europe as a fully democratic and law-governed partner in the emerging forms of cooperation.

The blueprint of our reforms is the country's new constitution, a fundamental law that reflects the values and aspirations of the Hungarian people, and the first such document since the "temporary" constitution imposed by the communists in 1949.

The new constitution has been widely misrepresented in the media. It is absurd to allege, as some

have, that the government is threatening basic liberties because it changes the name of the country from "the Republic of Hungary" to "Hungary," or because it adopts provisions on abortion and marriage that were normal throughout the Western world until recently, and are still normal in much of America.

Like other constitutions, our Fundamental Law will clarify the relations between state and civil society and between national and local government. We are introducing strict controls to limit state debt and to prevent any future government from bankrupting the country again. And we are initiating a process of electoral reform that will, we firmly believe, conform to the wishes of the Hungarian people.

In contrast to the U.K. and most other established Western European countries, our institutions of state have never been discussed or decided in Hungary. Hence, each of the "cardinal laws" referred to in the constitution has been debated and passed individually by Parliament. They required a two-thirds vote for their approval, and will require a vote of the same margin to be removed.

We retain popular support, as recent by-elections demonstrate. This is difficult for the political opposition to accept, and understandably so. The left staked exclusive claim to progress and political enlightenment in Hungary for 20 years and yet failed to do anything that does justice to these ideals.



AFP/Getty Images

People protest against Hungary's new constitution, which critics said curbed democracy, in front

of the Hungarian National Opera in Budapest on January 2.

They are proving more effective in opposition. A carefully orchestrated campaign is seeking to depict mass protest as an everyday phenomenon in Hungary. But the fact is that Hungary is one of the most stable democracies in Central Europe today. Hungarians have chosen a major system update, not under duress but by their own free will.

We can live with the criticism, but the misrepresentation of our reforms calls for a response. We believe that when we leave office, as one day we must, Hungarians will be grateful for our constitutional legacy, which will enable them to choose a government that clearly represents their interests through procedures that are transparent and fair.

They will be able to do so because of the changes we have made to Hungary's electoral law. To understand the motives for our electoral reform it is necessary to look at history. Like many of the nations of Central Europe, Hungary suffered arbitrary mutilation in 1918 when the victorious allies decreed the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory, and Hungarians beyond the new borders became ethnic minorities, often subject to adverse discrimination from the new majority governments.

Hungarians in neighboring states, who were connected by language, culture and family ties to people in Hungary, were deprived of their national identity. We decided to offer citizenship to these people of Hungarian descent and patrimony.

This was a controversial decision, but not without precedent. The post-communist government of Romania has offered citizenship to the Romanians of Moldova, a province seized from Romania by Stalin in World War II and now an independent republic. Germany also regards the German populations under Czech, Slovak and Romanian government as entitled to German citizenship.

In drawing up the new electoral law we have made provision for this expatriate population and granted them a vote. Again this is not unusual. Twenty-four out of 27 EU member states allow expatriate citizens to vote for party lists in national elections. Our intention is simply to ensure that the needs and interests of Hungarian expatriates are represented in the Hungarian political process. We respect without question the territory and sovereignty of our neighbors, and wish for Hungarian minorities to be loyal and grateful citizens of the countries where they reside, just as we wish the same from our minorities at home who themselves have been granted similar voting rights.

The changes to our church law also have to be seen in context. The fact that the Hungarian government wishes to limit the number and nature of the churches entitled to receive state funding can hardly be considered a threat to religious freedom. The government does not forbid anyone from worshiping in their own way, and has proposed a procedure whereby they can advance toward official recognition if they show themselves to be popular enough. Since official recognition means entitlement to state subsidies, the state surely has a right to lay down criteria for such recognition.

It is also important to note that freedom of religion and official endorsement of a particular religious group are two quite different things. The U.K. has freedom of religion, but the Anglican Church has the recognition of the state, with the monarch at its head and seats in the House of

Lords for many bishops. Is this a threat to religious freedom?

Criticisms of these reforms, both at home and abroad, often betray a poor understanding of Hungarian history and its institutional and legal systems. More worryingly, they appear to disregard the most fundamental tenet of any parliamentary democracy: the will of the people as expressed through the ballot box.

A two-thirds majority is a large mandate and an even bigger responsibility. We are respectful of both. At the same time, we hope for the understanding of our domestic adversaries and international partners alike. Hungarians are trying to find the way out of a difficult position: not only the present fiscal-economic crisis, but also the dead end in which the country found itself in 2010.

We are rebooting the country after 20 years of drift during which our institutions lost relevance and our economy fell badly behind. We want to play a positive role at the heart of a strong Europe. To do this, we must first put our own house in order.

—Mr. Kovacs is Hungary's minister of state for government communication.