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Political Stereotypes in the Hungarian Public Culture and the Mass Media about
the European Union

epsNet 2004 Plenary Conference
Political Science after the EU Enlargement: Challenges to the Discipline
Charles University, Prague, 18-19 June 2004

Introduction: Joy and Relaxation

Hungary joined the European Union on 1 May 2004, fifteen years after the decline and fall of the communist system. The date might be remembered in the history of the nation until Hungary exists. First time, after a tiring and hectic period of accession and adjustment, members of the political elites in their statements as well as citizens hanging around on the streets seemed to celebrate the feast with joy and relaxation. Moreover, inaugurating the new time wheel in the City Park, contrary to previous occasions, Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy did not speak too long about the new highways built or should be built by his government and the mass did not howled him down. On the Danube, the legendary Európa Kiadó - Europe To Be Rent - orchestra of the eighties came together for a concert at midnight. It was a state of grace.

The media ceased to fear of its own manipulating effects concerning ‘one-sided propaganda’ and enthused about the reunification of the continent at least for 48 hours. “Europe and Hungary – After Co-Existence: Marriage“ – that was the headline of *Népszabadság* on the eve of Enlargement Day. “Again in Europe”, “Back Home”, “Hungary in Europe” – the last title belonged to the article written by Ferenc Mádl, President of the Republic, published both in the conservative *Magyar Nemzet* and the left-liberal *Magyar Hírlap*.

In *Magyar Nemzet*, four pages behind, in an essay entitled “The Right Sides of the EU” the radical ideologist, István Lovas argued in favour of joining the European Union. He tried to convince anti-socialist (anti-communist) citizens that the internet, the single market as well as the conflict between the United States and some major European states would be used for the benefit of the Hungarian right wing parties. Some weeks before, this shift to *Realpolitik* could be discovered in a short TV message of Feró Nagy, a former dissident-alternative musician. Although he voted against the accession of Hungary to the European Union at the referendum in 2003, the bow-tied elderly rocker now

finally accepted the decision of the majority urging people to withdraw as much money from the EU budget as possible - since “that’s what the EU membership is all about”. By then, a proposal writing fever has broken out in the whole country.

The Long March to EU Membership and the Emergence of Political Stereotypes

Certainly, a more detailed description of the accession process gives us a less window-dressed picture. Namely, despite of a firm domestic support to Hungary’s entry into the European Union in the last one and a half decade, cautious and reluctant ‘yes, but’ europessimistic perceptions about the EU membership gained significance in the elite and public discourses. At the end of the accession negotiations, hard eurosceptic rumours have spread over in the popular culture, showing the increasing fears and anxiety of the Hungarians regarding their unknown future as citizens of a new and small member state inside the European Union. The low turn out at the referendum proved that enthusiasm had evaporated during the long waiting period for membership. Searching for explanations, the feeble political communication strategy of governmental and public institutions during the very short campaign period is only one component. Long-term factors include the gradually changing attitudes of citizens to the accession process, their dominant negative stereotyping of political actors and institutions on the European level and their embarrassing ignorance about the decision-making processes in a multi-level governance system as well as the striking lack of any public and intellectual debates on Hungary’s possible role in an enlarged Europe.

The ‘average’ Hungarian seems to have a serious European identity supplementing the Hungarian one. However, the European identity of a typical new citizen of the Union coming from this country is first of all a traditional

cultural feeling to a common continental history and, not in contrast to this emotion, a deep, pragmatic desire to belong to the circle of wealthy and strong nations nearby. The European political identity of the Hungarians, on the other hand, looks premature and shaky. In the last couple of years, when conflicts between the candidate country Hungary and the incumbent member states have received broader media attention, the political differences have been grasped mostly with the help of former collective memories and public knowledge gained under totally different historic circumstances.

By the completion of the accession negotiations, old negative political stereotypes have re-emerged from the past related now to assumed motivations and 'hidden objectives' of the EU (as such) both in the mass media and in the public opinion. Especially the last minute bargaining on the financial package, and the talks about transition periods regarding the implementation of the *acquis* like in the case of free movement of labour have been interpreted as heavy fights between 'us and them' and not as a democratic conciliation of interests and proposals amongst partners. In the last months of the accession talks, the mainstream mass media simply joined the political elites in their struggles for better final conditions and rarely was able to analyse the feasibility of the Hungarian demands and their implications on the internal structure of the EU budget, or to appreciate the point of views of the net contributors to the common expenditures on European level. In the last weeks before Accession Day, when most of the old member states made a decision not to give entirely free access to their labour markets for two, or, perhaps, five further years to the newcomers, hysterical articles were published about the EU, which did not take its own principles seriously. Most of the newspapers and news channels, however, did not mention that the same accession agreement made it possible for Hungary to limit the free sale of agricultural land to "foreigners" for another seven years after the enlargement.

Parallel to this media coverage, the mood of the people has developed towards a more hostile and suspicious way of thinking related to the Western countries, saying that “they do not really want us” to join their club. Another generally echoed statement declared that even if Hungary joined the European Union “we would become secondary citizens”. The main argument in this respect is once again the amount of transfers arriving from the common EU budget: “we do not receive the money what we deserve - look at the Greeks”. The egoistic attitudes of big and rich member states, which do not want to dip deeply enough into their pockets as well as the shortage of sensitiveness in the Brussels centre regarding our needs have often been unmasked in the news commentaries and at everyday small talks.

In this black and white approach the notion of national interest has become the key word for analysis. With this narrow-minded issue framing one could always explain the ‘obviously’ unfriendly behaviour of the old member states. In this concept, the role of ideas and ideologies, the significance of political personalities-leaders, or the scale of the grand enlargement project have been easily eliminated. In the nineties, the step-by-step development of the institutional reforms that ended up in the draft constitution elaborated by the European Convention in 2003 have been interpreted as dead-lock verbal struggles amongst the old member states, which were impotent to reach a fast solution because of their pure selfishness. Even after the turn of the millennium, the most important European institutions get often mixed in the Hungarian news media, whilst the political decision-making processes inside the European Union seem to be far too complicated for many reporters (and their editors) to be covered in an appropriate manner.

Complaints about the European Union are easily combined with some defeatism: “we will not be able to spend the EU funds”, sounds a new self-regretful prophecy. In its worst appearance, attack journalism against European institutions comes hand in hand with provincial moralising. Recently, however,

there is also a rising counter-tendency inside the media: advocate members of the Hungarian press corps in Brussels have started an *aufklärer* offensive bringing in all-European matters into the Hungarian public debates.

Hungarian Political Parties and European Elections

Today, the dominant europessimistic worldview of the Hungarian *Zeitgeist* holds together the ‘yes, but’ voters, those who abstained from opinion forming, and the citizens who opted for a ‘moderate no’ at the former referendum. Nevertheless, the major political organisations also contributed to the distortion of the Hungarian political agenda on European matters. As party politicians have had to face the first European elections in the history of the country, the claim that the main task for a new member state is to defend its national interests inside the EU bodies has been increasingly stressed by almost every political enterprise. The real role and functioning of the European Parliament has been transcended in order to increase their domestic support from a deeply polarised Hungarian electorate.

The most well known experiment was Prime Minister Medgyessy’s proposal for a joint list of the parliamentary parties. Although all the other political forces rejected the offer and criticised the populist message, the hard core of the idea that is the twenty-four Hungarian Members of the European Parliament need to collaborate in defence of national interests has remained an unchallenged taboo for all of them. It is very likely that the larger part of the Hungarian citizenry has not heard yet that the deputies in the European Parliament, instead of representing national differences, work in political groups of the European party families and vote overwhelmingly according to these ideological lines.

There is very little attention paid to European issues in the long and lukewarm election campaign. In May, in a parliamentary debate devoted to

Hungary's accession to the EU, none of the political parties advertised their political platforms. The major opposition party, however, published a European program a little bit later. Compared to its former soft eurosceptic position, the former ruling party now speaks on a pro-European language. The new vision of a Europe Union constructed by communities of communities has been still combined with an ultra-conservative rhetoric: "For Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union (...), it is natural that both the individual and people's communities request for the blessing of God when they face some kind of a new, significant change. Members of Fidesz know that they have arisen from Christian culture by way of preserving such values also in a modern Europe. We share Robert Schuman's opinion: 'Democracy shall either be Christian or shall not be.'" The common political stereotypes of the Hungarians about the EU come back in the wording of the program, as well: "we can only say that as a new member state for the time being we can only have the objective of attaining equal treatment or at least approximating it, because both the extent of and the opportunities of access to the structural and cohesion funds are more unfavourable for us than for the countries that are members already, and in the area of direct subsidies for agriculture, unequal treatment and its consequences are even more profound. This factor only confirms the validity of the fundamental thesis that weak, powerless countries can easily be at a disadvantage while strong, powerful ones can gain new strength and value added from integration."

From an analytical perspective the Hungarian political parties might have had four pure options before the elections. First, they could have chosen the usual national framework of party competition and domestic political issues using the old partisan cleavages to mobilise their supporters. Second, the sole rhetoric on the defence of national interests inside the European Union might have created a single-issue campaign: who is better, more courageous and efficient to struggle for Hungary? Third, the political rivals could have re-started the debate on the advantages and disadvantages of Hungary's accession to the

EU organising the electorate into pro-European and eurosceptic blocks. Fourth, members of the contesting political elites might have led a public debate about fresh European topics, including the draft constitution, the pros and cons regarding further enlargement waves, and Hungary's possible contribution to the united Europe.

In their public discourse, Hungarian politicians seemed to be satisfied with the first two options. This is one reason why the party rallies have been attended only by the hard core of activists. According to the declarations of the socialists, the major governing party, participation at the European elections matters, since it is very important who would represent Hungary in the European Parliament. In the eyes of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Party, these are mid-term protest elections against the left-liberal government. For the two smaller parliamentary parties, the Alliance of Free Democrats and the Hungarian Democratic Forum, the campaign has brought the possibility and the necessity to prove their own political characters showing clear distance from their bigger - current or former - coalition partners. During these months, the only issue of European, better to say, global significance was raised by MDF: “Bring the Hungarian soldiers back home from Iraq”. This demand, however, expressed first of all the intra-block logic of party competition between Fidesz and the more moderate traditional conservative party, which has campaigned with the slogan: “For a normal Hungary”.

As for the media, it has focused almost exclusively on the well known and routine coverage of domestic politics, political power games and the PR messages of the parties. Although the tension amongst the political camps in the entire society has been much lower than at its peak in 2002, it is not a surprise that identity politics have played the most relevant role in the mobilisation of partisan supporters once again. For example, the Alliance of Free Democrats has concentrated on the biographies of the top candidates: László Kovács, President of the Hungarian Socialist Party worked as an *apparatchik* inside the communist

party hierarchy, Pál Schmitt from Fidesz had a high ranking position when Hungary boycotted the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984, whilst the liberal mayor of Budapest, Gábor Demszky was a main activist of the underground democratic opposition and edited *samizdat* literature in the Kádár-regime.

Conclusion: Hungary as a Member State of the Enlarged European Union

Neither the central communication campaign before the referendum about accession in 2003, nor the party competition for the seats in the European Parliament in 2004 was able to widen the horizon and replace the europessimistic perspective of Hungarian citizens. Just two weeks before Election Day, ignorance about the institutional balance inside the European Union (and not clear-cut political euroscepticism) was reflected in the front article of the liberal *Élet és Irodalom*: “At this election, nothing important is at stake: it will be a simple EP election where bureaucrats receive mandates to a body, which is not the most important one in European matters – at least the hottest issues are decided elsewhere.” Another popular misunderstanding that is European Commissioners represent national interests has survived the adjustment process to the European institutions, as well.

It has not been a self-evident and smooth process for Hungary to become a member state of the European Union. Since this task has been finally completed, politicians, journalists and citizens, sooner or later, might find their ways to accommodate to the new situation of their country and its increased opportunities inside the enlarged EU.

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