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**A MISSING DEBATE?:
HUNGARY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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Sussex European Institute**

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the emergence and development of the European issue in Hungarian politics. The question of belonging to Europe (recently epitomised by the European Union) has never been just a matter of politics but one of cultural and geopolitical identity as well. Answers to it have always been part of different definitions of Hungarian identity. While all the mainstream Hungarian political parties unanimously support the idea of Hungary's accession to the EU, government policies aiming at accession have been fiercely disputed. Clashes among political parties over policy issues reflect different images of Europe ingrained in the Hungarian public. However, these fragmented, day-to-day policy clashes cannot take the place of a strategic debate about Hungary's EU membership. Hungarian political parties have so far failed to define a coherent strategy. The absence of such a debate, the paper argues, may offer a strong opportunity for marginal political forces to gain support by exploiting and revitalising some anti-western traditions. These newly emerged and so far insignificant political actors base their ideology on protection of national independence and national sovereignty against EU membership, and thus may prepare the ground for the emergence of a genuinely anti-European movement.

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1. Introduction

As for most people in the central and east European countries, for Hungarians the term ‘Europe’ is not just a simple geographical denomination. This term is heavily burdened by normative meaning and connotations. Although in a geographical sense it describes the continent lying between the Atlantic and the Urals, it is common for the Hungarian public to confine its political-cultural meaning to the area of western Europe. For the term has strong connotations. Depending on one’s ideological affiliation, Europe could be seen as the embodiment of the evil or that of the good. For some it is primarily a socio-political category, the cradle of democratic and industrialised societies with high living standards and strong individual liberties. Others perceive Europe as a cultural-religious phenomenon, as above all the stronghold of western Christianity and civilisation which stemmed directly from the ancient culture of the Greeks and Rome. There are also still some people for whom Europe is an obsolete and reactionary part of our contemporary experience. With its consumer capitalism and nation states, runs their argument, Europe incarnates rather an evolutionary blind alley than the most successful form of modernisation.

Perceptions of Europe in east central Europe, no matter how varied they may be, share a basic point: Europe, and questions of being or not being a part of it, are not neutral, geographical dilemmas. Favouring Europe or rejecting it is not only a question of individual sympathy or antipathy, it means at the same time taking a political position in the great modernisation debate of the 19th and 20th centuries. Attitudes to Europe, i.e. to western Europe, strongly influence an individual’s position in domestic cultural, economic, and political disputes in domestic issues and also have provoked one of the most important spiritual cleavages among east European intellectuals. The substance of a century-long and deeply dividing conflict can be traced back to the painful experience of forced modernisation. In this process, two key factors, socio-economic modernisation and progress on the one hand, and national identity and heritage on the other, have been set at odds with each other making the terms ‘fatherland’ and ‘progress’ antagonistic to each other.

In this conflict, evident from the 19th century, pro-European intellectuals have often neglected the delicacy of the national question and state, and focus exclusively on the case for modernisation according to west European patterns. Their opponents from the anti-European wing emphasise differences between east and west European developments, advocate the idea of ‘national progress’. This fierce debate was interrupted by Soviet troops immediately after world war II. The Soviet occupation meant

that Hungary's geopolitical arrangement was no longer disputable for forty years: it unambiguously belonged to the eastern part of Europe. During the Communist period, it seemed, there was no chance to continue the debate; because of its geopolitical connotations, the whole issue of the relationship with Europe became a taboo.

Despite this political constraint, the intellectual dispute nevertheless persisted in Hungarian culture. Collective memory and individual patterns of socialisation have preserved the essence of arguments, reproducing by this means some typical attitudes and roles. Literature provided one of the most important reinforcements of this preservation process. Thus, it was no accident that, as authors were able to take advantage of widening opportunities, literature became the cradle of the revived debate during the eighties. As the most 'liberal' socialist country, Hungary experienced a certain degree of free speech in social and political questions, but without questioning the taboo on the European issue. This relative freedom of debate was a necessary, but not sufficient, precondition for the eventual democratic transition.

One of the typical products of this intellectual preparation for the systemic change was the debate on 'central Europe'. It was an attempt at redefining the region's geopolitical and ideological position, at least verbally liberating it from ideologico-political orthodoxy. In view of its revealing impact at that time, it seems reasonable to start the survey of the more recent 'Euro-debate' in Hungary with this controversy.

This paper outlines the evolution of the debate in Hungary on membership of the European Union (EU). One might have expected that the outcome of this debate would be unambiguous: all rational arguments speak in favour of the EU membership. The case, however, is not so simple. My argument is that, although deep conflicts lie behind different attitudes to Europe, these conflicts have not yet been brought into full light. The most important reason for the postponement of this debate could be the issue's relative unimportance so far, because Hungary had no chance for joining the EU in the short run. Notwithstanding, 1997 and 1998 could be decisive years from the point view of Hungarian membership. The prospect of accession negotiations between Hungary and the EU is revitalising the domestic debate and compelling political actors to define and to articulate their own interests.

The paper is in three main parts. In the first part the essence of the 'central Europe' debate will be outlined, and the way it designated the main positions for the subsequent debates. The second part outlines the political and ideological arguments about Europe since 1990. The third part shows the practical application of these arguments by delineating their relevance to policy issues.

2. The Rebirth of Central Europe

Questions of geopolitical identity are constant elements in the history of a region as disputed as east central Europe. Answers to the questions are multiple. On the one hand they give explanations of historico-cultural identity, but on the other hand they provide political alternatives. Roughly there are three groups of these replies: east central Europe as the easternmost part of western Europe; its status as the westernmost part of eastern Europe; and central Europe as a more or less independent region between East and West. While the first two approaches, in accordance with the mainstream in the 20th century, accept only two remarkably different Europes, the third explanation tries to make the picture more nuanced, by introducing a third, 'transitory' region between the other two.

The first approach perceives western Europe as mainly a cultural product. Underscoring the importance of the cultural factors, its proponents regard the borders of western Christianity as the boundary of western civilisation. In their train of thought the differences between East and West are the cultural odds and rooted in the contrast between western Christianity and Orthodoxy. This dissimilarity is the basis for the divergent development of political cultures and structures. In contrast to east Europeans' political mentality, according to the approach, the main distinguishing features of the western culture are: democratic political culture; governments based on the principle of rule of law and constitutionalism; and the respect of human rights.

The idea of Hungary's belonging to the West has been underpinned by cultural and historical facts. As in west European countries, and contrary to eastern Europe, the prerequisites and impact of the Renaissance, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the Enlightenment can be found in Hungary. Religiously and culturally Hungary has belonged to western civilisation for a thousand years, and its traditional political structures had been in accordance with western patterns prior to the Soviet occupation. Hungary in this sense is part of the West, even if its easternmost part.

In contrast to this approach, traditionally the most influential one in Hungary, the idea of Hungary as the westernmost part of Eastern Europe appeared as a brand new, yet very powerful, notion supported by the communists. Their train of thought was grounded on some social and economic facts. The region's relative backwardness, distorted social structure and so far unsuccessful modernisation have served as evidence for its difference from the West. Yet, this argument was not convincing for Hungarians. Thus, with the difference between east central Europe and western Europe in mind, Hungarian intellectuals sought a different legitimation for the region's distinct identity. In a situation, where a 'pro-Western' explanation was practically banned and the 'pro-Eastern' one was not popular, the idea of central Europe was reborn in the eighties as a natural reaction to the Soviet-model of socialism.

The idea that the Hungarians are neither west nor east European people has not been unknown before. It emerged periodically when Hungary's identity or its geopolitical arrangement was uncertain or changing. It was the case in 1918 when Oszkár Jászi was

the main protagonist of this idea, during the interwar period, this was articulated by László Németh, among others, and in 1945 when István Bibó represented this idea. Its latest revival was started in 1983 when, Jenő Szűcs, a historian published an otherwise strictly professional study on his theory of the three historical regions of Europe.¹ The core of his argument is that clear socio-historical signs make the central European region different from either eastern or western Europe.

The region that contains the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy has weaker civic structures and civil society than the western societies, but not as weak as elsewhere in eastern Europe. Its economic and social development has been slower and more uncertain, but not as slow and uncertain as that of eastern Europe. Its history has been characterised by discontinuity and a particular pattern of ‘stop-go’; short periods of catching up alternated with longer periods of stagnation.

Szűcs’s study had a striking impact on Hungarian opinion. For the first time since the 1950s Hungary was argued to have at least as many distinguishing features in contrast with the East as with the West. The study implied that the central European countries were more developed than those in east Europe. In the then prevailing circumstances it meant that there was a chance for putting the central European issue on the agenda. The whole process of the debate, however, was strictly confined by the *Realpolitik* of the eighties. Hungary’s then political arrangement and its relations with the Soviet Union could not be called into question. In view of these limits the debate was confined to mainly cultural questions.

Nevertheless, there was a drift toward a democratic society during the years. As the constraints on free speech were relaxed in Hungary, the issue, originally expressed in a cultural debate, became defined politically in the development of different political scenarios regarding the future. Under the slogan of central European identity, participants in the debate tried to redefine the country’s geopolitical arrangement. The favourite alternative to the *status quo* was the solution known as ‘Finlandisation’. The strategy to achieve Hungary’s Finlandisation would be carried out incrementally. It presupposed a rearrangement of the European *status quo*. Finlandisation would be the result of a convergence between the First and Second World involving an ‘understanding’ of Soviet interests, i. e. the USSR’s emancipation and its incorporation into the First World. The path to this end would be incremental democratisation through reforms to the east European socialist countries. Convergence of this kind in a pattern of global politics could secure for Hungary a new position in the international system. The term Finlandisation referred to the envisaged change to the status of Hungary as, like Finland, a neutral and free country with special relationship with the Soviet Union.

The theory’s and its representatives’ relation to the politics has been at least controversial. While its advocates’ aims have been mainly political, they were to reach them by avoiding political devices. The country, and, even more, the region’s political

¹Szűcs, J., ‘Three Historical Regions of Europe’, in J. Keane (ed.), Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives, London-New York: Verso, 1988.

future had been described in non-political (more precisely anti-political) terms.² These fed on a deep distrust of politicians and the political world, and depicted the emerging central Europe as an alliance of strictly non-violent civic movements, leading to an intellectuals' republic or spiritual community. There was simply no place in this idyllic picture for conflicts, armies or even for self-interests. Interests serving as the essential basis for politics and characteristics of politicians were mocked and scorned as shameful factors and anti-intellectual personal traits. Although the theory's heyday was relatively short-lived (it flourished between 1988 and 1990) its influence is not negligible even today. A small but influential group still favours the idea of a neutral and 'non-aligned', anti-political Hungary.

There was yet another, almost equally important, conception of central Europe during the late eighties. Its origins could be traced back to the interwar period, when a group of writers, known as 'populists' constructed the theory of the 'third way'. Adherents of this theory, showing similarities to socialist peasant movements in other east central European countries, attempted to find a *modus vivendi*, a third way, of social development between western capitalism and eastern socialism. Its modern version has had a serious impact on some groups of reform-communists and writers. The message was the same as in the thirties: Hungary had to find its own way, without imitating foreign patterns. Hungary's economic future, according to this conception, would be based on its agricultural traditions, and, socially, on its peasantry, although this did not exist in the traditional sense because of socialist collectivisation. The political structure would be neither capitalist nor socialist, and Hungary's foreign policy orientation would be strictly neutral and 'non-aligned', providing the country with a bridge between the two world systems.

It can thus be seen, that several points are shared by the two versions of central Europe, which embody two traditional mainstreams of Hungarian public thinking, although they started from contrary bases. In the political circumstances of the eighties, they reached remarkably similar conclusions. Political neutrality, incremental reforms and a neither Eastern nor Western status seemed the most which could be achieved at that time. Nonetheless, there is one crucial difference between the two conceptions of central Europe. The 'Finlandisation-theory' had neither anti-Eastern nor anti-Western connotations. It implicitly favoured Western solutions, but showing an understanding of the strategic interests of the Soviet Union, the theory would have acquiesced in securing a limited elbow room for Hungary in the socialist system. In contrast, the 'third way' concept was equally hostile to the West and to the East, since both world systems appeared as threats to Hungary, and their opinions about the achievements of the Western and Eastern civilisation were equally sceptical. Its proponents' aversion to capitalism turned into an anti-Western attitude, which was underpinned by a strong nationalist rhetoric and became the precursor of a Eurosceptic movement.

Theories of central Europe, albeit expected to gain mass popular support, have failed to mobilise the citizenry. Even the most favoured idea of co-ordinating central

²See Konrád, G., *Antipolitics*, London: Quartet Books, 1984.

European civil societies has proved an illusion. The notion of central Europe as an independent region has collapsed under the weight of the historical events of 1989-90. The arrival of democracy prompted an urgent need to redefine Hungary's status in the changing world order, most importantly by re-evaluating relations with the EU. The prominence of this issue has been enhanced by the prospect of EU membership as a symbol of belonging to the western nations for the first time since world war II.

3. The European Union and the Hungarian Political Parties

The image of Europe has thus been ambiguous for Hungarians. On the one hand there is the picture of a selfish and unreliable West, which left Hungary in the lurch several times in the course of history. Hungarians' collective memory kept these events in evidence in 1989-90 and hence formed a mistrustful attitude to the West. The most recent and most painful experience of the West's 'faithlessness' was the Hungarian revolution of 1956, when the whole nation hoped for liberation by western or UN troops. Once those hopes were dashed, one of the deepest historical impressions for the generation of 1956 was the country's loneliness and its 'betrayal' by western powers.

Implicitly, the propaganda machine of the Kádár regime reinforced this feeling of loneliness. Beyond the official slogans about Hungarian-Soviet friendship and Lenin's way, a subtle message for the common people was suggested by the mass media. Its essence as the follows: 'We know that the socialist system is far from perfect, and, probably, capitalism is a better one. Nevertheless, taking into account political circumstances, our position in the Soviet Bloc is not the worst. Moreover, Russians, although not rich, are very helpful and friendly people, in contrast to the western nations, which disdain Hungarians'. This inferiority complex and the wounded feelings of Hungarians, supported by such propaganda have much influenced opinions about Europe, and still do so today.

On the other hand, there is the image of an economically prosperous and democratic Europe. This portrait of Europe is personified by the EC/EU as the most generous supporter of democratic transition in Hungary. Its popularity has been increased by the economic and political expectations of the Hungarian citizenry. Considering the EU not as a result of a relatively long historical process, but as a reality and an enduring symbol of western ascendancy, the EU has appeared more as a static structure, a club of the rich, than as a dynamic institutional framework. Its positive achievements have fascinated the Hungarian public. A consumer society, with high living standards and political democracy, has not therefore been viewed as two connected, yet different phenomena, but simply as two sides of the same coin. It was a general assumption in 1989 that political democracy, based on a competitive multiparty system, would automatically produce a prosperous economy.

It has been a time of high hopes, indeed. It seemed just a matter of few years before Hungary would overcome its economic difficulties and, for the first time in

history, become an institutionalised part of the West. The EC/EU, therefore, has been of huge significance for Hungarians. It is the main external financial source for Hungary's recovery and at the same time a unique expression of the community of western civilisation. Hungary's chance of EU membership promises more access to financial resources, as well as a moral justification of a thousand-year dream about the nation's presence in western Europe. This is the reason why the European issue was not controversial during the first election campaign in 1990. There was a widespread consensus among the political parties that one of Hungary's basic foreign policy objectives should be EU membership as soon as possible.

Although all the mainstream political parties, which emerged as a result of the democratic change in 1988-89, were manifestly pro-European, some differences in their views should be recorded. These differences could be attributed to different perceptions of the EU. Left, socialist and social democratic parties judged European integration to be a historical process that had brought about the final victory of social democratic values. This group was composed in 1990 of two important political parties in 1990. One was the re-established Hungarian Social Democratic Party (HSDP), a traditionally strong, centre-left party, considered to be one of the most important political actors at that time. The other was the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP).

Despite an encouraging start, the career of the HSDP ended tragically when, after a series of splits, it failed to become a parliamentary party in 1990 and, as a consequence of the election results, disappeared from the political scene. As an authentic social democratic party, it had close relations with west European social democratic parties and became a full member of the Socialist International as the first party from east central Europe in 1989. It is no wonder, therefore, that, lacking experience in domestic affairs, but having good relations with western political parties, the social democrats based their campaign upon the possibility of EU membership. Articulating a social democratic vision of the EU, they emphasised its social aspects, as a supranational community grounded on traditional social democratic values. Their message to the voters was that the final solution for Hungary's economic and social hardships would be a social democratic government that could lead Hungary into the EU as soon as possible. However, Hungarians did not find this message attractive. The party's neglect of important domestic issues and overemphasis on their excellent relations with foreign political parties created an image with the citizens of the HSDP as an elitist party. Moreover, these relations have provoked a backlash: it was deeply offensive to Hungarians, who are traditionally sensitive to the country's independence and sovereignty. Thus, the social democrats' electoral promises were never realised. Since, contrary to expectations, the party became a marginal force immediately after the elections, their political vision had no serious impact on Hungarian voters. The electoral failure of the HSDP indicated to other political parties that Hungarians, although interested in the EU, are not enthusiastic about it. Domestic problems have more salience than idle talk about Europeanness.

The HSP consists of reform communists. As the successors of the communist party, Hungarian socialists were eager to form the party's image as an authentic social democratic party. Although they subsequently made some progress in this direction, their attempts were absolutely unconvincing in 1990. Since the basis for the party's legitimacy

rests on the transition years of the late eighties, they have concentrated almost exclusively upon emphasising domestic achievements of their rule. Their vision of Europe was basically similar to that of social democrats. As a proof of their pro-European orientation, they often referred to the role of Gyula Horn, the former minister of foreign affairs, who made a large contribution to German unification.

So, the social democratic-socialist vision of Europe could be summed up as concentrating on socio-economic and welfare issues, while their approach to the EU was basically supranationalist or federalist. In the period following the elections of 1990, the HSP remained the only representative of the moderate left in Hungarian politics as a consequence of the disappearance of the HSDP. After surviving a crisis in 1990, the socialists soon gained popularity shortly from 1991 onwards, as a result of widespread disappointment at the Conservative government's performance. Having been of only of marginal significance in 1990, it had become the most important mainstream party by 1993, and simultaneously changed its character from a left-wing socialist to a centre-left party of a social democrat or social liberal kind.

In contrast to the left's definition of the EU as a basically socio-economic construction, the liberals - Alliance of Free Democrats (AFD) and the Fidesz-Alliance of Young Democrats - deemed it an economic formation, but rejected its welfare character. For the liberals, the EU has been the symbol of the superiority of western values over the eastern ones. As a primarily economic community, the EU's economic and social development has demonstrated the wisdom of free-trade principles. Its economic and political success has justified the basic liberal argument that there is no third way, only a choice between socialism and capitalism. Since the socialism was ineffective and produced an inherently brutal and oppressive political system, its historic defeat was a necessity. With the passing of the socialist period, the most important thing is to prevent its return, and the best way to do so is through EU membership. For the liberals there was no alternative to joining the EU as not only the best, but also only way to modernise Hungary, hence their strong support for joining the EU as soon as possible. It is no wonder, therefore, that the liberal parties were the most enthusiastic about Europe during the early nineties.

Although the two liberal parties shared the same view on most aspects of the European issue, a slight difference between their attitudes could be observed already then which was an indicator their subsequently divergent political development. This divergence is due to the different cultural heritages of the two parties. The AFD, composed mainly of urban intellectuals with a left-wing dissent (neo-marxist, Euro-communist) background, was more inclined to accept the social democratic standpoint about Europe. As the years have passed, their conception of Europe has moved closer to that of the social democrats, in focusing on it as basically a technical question. In contrast, Fidesz, representing young, often first-generation intellectuals connected through family ties to the provinces, has become more and more anti-communist, and at the same time moved towards a more conservative interpretation of Europe. This divergence, as will be seen, has split the liberal wing of Hungarian politics: the AFD has become an authentic social-liberal party; and Fidesz now defines itself as a liberal-

conservative political movement, and the party has been renamed as Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Party.

Conservative parties, such as the Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF), the Independent Smallholders' Party (ISP), and the Christian Democratic People's Party (CDPP), have taken a very different approach. They define their position towards the EU not only as a matter of the future, but also as an interpretation of the past in that they regard the EU as a normative personification of Europe. Defining Europe by its cultural attributes, their point of departure was that Hungary was a country closely tied to the West because of its basic cultural features. Although violently isolated from its natural environment for forty years, Hungary's basic characteristics have remained untouched. Disputing the image of the EU as social democratic, they emphasise the conception and recent development of the European integration as inspired by christian democratic politicians.

Conservatives have therefore focused on the political aspects of European integration, with the EU constituting the family of western nations to which Hungary traditionally belongs. Their slogan, therefore, was not 'the road to Europe', but 'return to Europe'. Since German christian democracy and the social market model have been an example for the Hungarian conservatives, they have been committed to the idea of joining the EU as soon as possible, although with less enthusiasm than the liberals. Their objections to European integration have sprung from their aversion to a supranational Europe. The principle of national sovereignty has been the cornerstone of the conservative vision about the nation's future. Hence, the option of joining Europe was attractive only if it was based on the conception of a Europe of nations.

The result of the first free elections was to bring to power in 1990 a coalition government grounded on cooperation between the three conservative parties. The new government, as will be shown in the next section, attached great importance to creating a consensus in foreign policy issues. One core element of this was support for diplomatic efforts aiming at early EU membership. Thus, it seemed in the summer and autumn of 1990 that the European issue was resolved and Hungary was indisputably a Europhile country. There was only one anti-European movement: the communist Workers' Party, an extra-parliamentary force with its traditional and not too attractive arguments against European integration.

Subsequent political developments, however, made the Hungarian political scene more complex, partly as a result of growing domestic controversies, and partly through divergences between party programmes. Of course, a divergent development of party programmes and differentiation among political parties were a consequence of a process of self-purification in the party system. Increasing pressure on the ruling coalition generated different political reactions within the parties. The ISP practically withdrew from the coalition in 1992 as a result of their dissatisfaction with the government's privatisation and agricultural policy. In 1993, a small but influential group, left the HDF, the coalition's main force, in protesting against the signature of the basic treaty with the

Ukraine and established a new party, known as the Party of Hungarian Justice and Life (PHJL).

This transformation of Hungarian politics led to a redefinition of party images, including a re-thinking of their positions in the European issue. Disappointed expectations of early EU membership have provoked a kind of apathy and disillusionment has become prevalent in Hungarian public opinion. Although, the governing coalition was eager to propagate its official view about Europe, Hungarians became more and more sceptical about the desirability of membership and grew more sensitive about the issue of Hungarians in neighbouring countries. EU's hesitation has increased the feeling that the history would be repeated and that Europe would leave Hungary in the lurch once again. It was, therefore, just a question of time, until this feeling took a political form.

The transformation process has not left Hungarian political parties' attitudes towards Europe untouched. The original political gap between the former communist and non-communist parties has largely disappeared with the AFD and the HSP moving closer to each other from 1992 onwards, and forming a coalition after the election in 1994. Fidesz, in spite of efforts to keep its position in the political centre, has become a more and more strikingly liberal-conservative party with a strongly European orientation. Finally, as a consequence of movements among mainstream parties, a new group of parties has emerged on the right. This new group includes the redefined ISP and the newly formed PHJL. Whereas the ISP has not revised its view about the EU remaining a strongly critical, but Europhile party, the appearance of the PHJL has recreated an old strand in the Hungarian debate on Europe.

In keeping with its character an 'old-fashioned' nationalist party, the basic values in the discourse of the PHJL are about economic and political independence and the nation state as an end in itself; thus the main aim is to achieve the national interest at any price. The PHJL's political programme is grounded in a revitalised version of the 'third way' approach, arguing that Hungary must not follow either Western or Eastern patterns, but that a Hungarian model of social and economic development must be found. Thus, European integration is perceived as a danger to Hungarian independence and is promoted by the traitors in the liberal and socialist parties. Even though the PHJL's importance could be judged negligible in that they failed to win seats in parliament in 1994, it would be a mistake to underestimate its impact on the Hungarian electorate. First, the party's support has grown considerably since 1994, its popularity according to opinion polls now having crossed the parliamentary threshold, which would enable it to enter parliament as a mainstream party in the next term. Secondly, they represent an embryonic Euro-scepticism that could be a platform for arguments against the EU as the Hungarian debate on Europe intensifies.

Party programmes for the 1994 elections introduced relatively few novelties on this subject. Serious political problems, such as the reorganisation of public administration, questions of privatisation, and so on, pushed the European issue into the background. However, to make the mosaic simpler, we can state that views on Europe have polarised to a certain degree. Parties of the recent governing coalition - HSP and

AFD - are Euro-enthusiasts. They see EU membership as the only chance of survival in current economic and political conditions. Given their technocratic views on the EU, they have few worries about Hungary's integration, and rather than engage in big political debates, they focus on day-to-day policy issues.

The opposition parties, on the other hand, have shifted in different directions. While centre-right parties (HDF, Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Party) have remained basically in favour of joining the EU, the ISP has moved closer to the approach represented by the PHJL and more recently the christian democrats have stepped on to the threshold of Europhobia. Among the opposition parties, undoubtedly the Fidesz is the party most in favour of Hungarian membership of the EU. Its interest and activity in practical European issues is reflected in the party's occupation of the chair of the parliamentary committee for the European affairs. Nevertheless, Fidesz's image of Europe has shifted along with its transformation from a radical liberal to a liberal-conservative party in that it now stands closer to conservative conceptions, grounded on cultural attributes, than to the technocratic approach represented by the current governing coalition. This does not mean that the Fidesz would neglect practical aspects of adjusting to Europe; on the contrary, they emphasise their importance. What makes a difference is that while the governing coalition holds the policy of joining Europe to be a strictly technical process, 'Europeanisation' as they call it, for Fidesz it is a complex re-adjustment and involves not only institutional and economic factors, but also cultural and social aspects. Probably the most important point in common between Fidesz and the HDF is the worry about an unprepared accession, a concern not shared by the governing parties. Given recent circumstances, they say, Hungary is not yet prepared for joining the EU. Its economy, society and culture are too weak and poor and would not be a match for other EU members in conditions of free competition. The result of joining unprepared would be Hungary's defencelessness in the Union.

Among Hungarian political parties, undoubtedly the CDPP has undergone the most fundamental changes. Starting as a small centre-right party, it had been a loyal sleeping partner in the coalition with the HDF. Its leaders were swept away after the election in 1994 and it now has a new dynamic leadership strongly favouring the idea of cooperation with the right-wing ISP. This political shift has been reflected in its change of position on European issues. As an embryonic Eurosceptic party, the CDPP sees European integration and national independence in antagonistic terms. Its leader has declared overtly that: 'In the christian democratic politics, the homeland has priority over the European Union'.³

The polarisation process should be considered not only at the level of party elites, but also among the voters. As a recent public opinion poll suggests, there are discernible differences in attitudes to European integration among the voters of different political parties. 55% of Hungarian voters support joining the EU as soon as possible; 23% are hostile towards EU membership; 22% are uncertain or have no opinion. The proportions among the stable voters for the mainstream parties are as follows: 74% of HSP voters

³*Népszabadság* (daily), 16 Dec. 1996.

favour immediate membership, 12% are against, 14% are uncertain; AFD: 70%, 8%, 22%; Fidesz-HCP: 64%, 22%, 14%; HDF: 57%, 14%, 29%; ISP: 55%, 23%, 22%; CDPP: 51%, 21%, 28%.⁴ Although opinion poll data must be interpreted with some caution, it can be concluded that party attitudes towards Europe are reflected in their electorates.

In short, this divergent development of parties has dramatically changed the single-coloured and Europhile political picture of Hungary. Parties' conceptions about EU membership have crystallised around three poles. There is the technocratic Euro-enthusiast approach from the governing parties (HSP, AFD) with no concerns about Hungary's future in the Union. Secondly, there is a worried, but Europhile, conception represented by Fidesz, the HDF, and the ISP, which are anxious about the recent state of the economy and society, but emphasise the importance of the EU membership. Finally, there is an embryonic Eurosceptic view, embodied by the CDPP and the PHJL. This view could provide a basis for the development of an authentically Eurosceptic conception, rooted in the Hungarian traditions which we outlined earlier. It is embryonic so far, because the lack of a strategic debate on EU membership has not meant that these parties have not been under pressure to formulate their views in a more or less coherent framework.

4. The EU as a Legitimising Argument

Adjustment to the EU became a highly controversial issue in Hungary from 1990 onwards. Although every mainstream party agrees on its relevance, the approaches suggested by the parties differ depending on their respective vision about Europe. Different policy-arenas serve as natural battlefields for a clash of ideas, when general conceptions about the relations between Hungary and the EU become translated into concrete terms. An overview of some of the important issues serves to illustrate the parties' positions.

To take foreign policy first, it is important to mention at the outset, that this is a traditionally controversial domain for the Hungarian public because of the populous Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries. To avoid a national crisis, the first democratic government felt bound to forge a consensus on foreign policy issues as a precondition for the effective representation of Hungary's national interests. On the basis of this consensus, the government's foreign policy directives in 1990 set three interlocking targets. These were the Euro-Atlantic integration, cooperation with neighbouring countries, and the protection of Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries. Although these directives still constitute the foundations of the foreign policy since pursued by each government in office, the priorities attached to each element of the strategy are the subject of continual debates.

⁴*Népszava* (daily), 16 Dec. 1996.

The previous government between 1990-94 had been accused by the opposition parties of neglecting Euro-Atlantic integration and of coming into conflict with EU members over issues relating to the protection of the Hungarian minorities. On the other hand, the current opposition parties charge the governing coalition with leaving the Hungarians abroad in the lurch and with pursuing a biased approach to Euro-Atlantic integration. What is important is that both the governing and opposition parties use adjustment to Europe as an ultimate argument. Recent examples are provided by the ratification processes for the basic treaties with Slovakia and Romania. The governing parties, acknowledging that these treaties are not the best from the point of view of Hungarian national interests, regarded them as a necessary precondition for Hungary's application for EU membership. Moreover, according to the opposition parties, the treaties are of no importance for EU officials and will not strengthen, but rather weaken, Hungarian positions during the eventual accession negotiations.

One can also see the EU being drawn on as a legitimising argument on domestic policy issues. The EU's regional policy has served as a justification for the attempted abolition of counties. According to the arguments of the government, the county, the traditional way of organising Hungary territorially, is not compatible with EU practice because of its smallness. Adjustment to EU practice therefore demands the formation of regions as new and larger territorial units.⁵ Opposition parties, apart from Fidesz, attack the government's plan to abandon this Hungarian tradition, claiming that a modernised county-system could serve as well as new regions. To defend the counties, they refer to the EU's multicultural character and argue that anti-traditionalism cannot be a requirement of EU membership.

Similar points can be made on other policy issues, too. The government frequently refers to EU practices and requirements in giving reasons for their concrete policy steps. A few recent examples include the planned reform of the financial system,⁶ the reshaping of the agricultural support system,⁷ and the reconstruction of industrial production.⁸ Generally it is added that the implementation of the government's programme is the only safeguard against lagging behind EU-standards. The governing coalition makes serious efforts to present their programme as the only authentic blueprint for Hungary to join Europe.

By the same token, opposition parties maintain that the process of integration is not simply one of adjustment, as argued by the governing parties, but rather a serious reform, which includes the strengthening of Hungary's industrial capacity, and increasing living standards, in order to make Hungary a real and reasonably strong partner in the EU. In attacking the government's policies, they often refer to the EU. Opposition parties accuse the government of mistreating of the economic crisis, and of introducing steps in

⁵Interview with the Minister for the Environment and Urban Development, *Népszabadság* (daily), 3 Dec. 1996.

⁶*Magyar Hírlap* (daily), 24 Oct. 1996.

⁷*Népszava* (daily), 16 Oct. 1996., *Népszabadság* (daily), 4 Nov. 1996.

⁸*Népszabadság* (daily), 18 Oct. 1996.

economic management, which do not actually conform to EU practice.⁹ They also argue that the government is destroying the intellectual capacity, Hungary's most valuable contribution to the EU,¹⁰ and so on. Thus, in some ways, Hungary is moving away from Europe rather than approaching it. To make Hungary a weak state exposed to external pressures would cause it to lose its essential attractiveness. It would be the death of the country, in that an EU based on the self-interests of the member states would not be attracted by the arrival of a weak and unimportant Hungary.

Another argument often emphasised by the opposition is that the governing coalition is preparing not for the accession of the whole country, for the benefits of the few. In current circumstances EU membership would be a great benefit only for the few big firms, run almost exclusively by former Communist entrepreneurs and for the richest parts of society, while all the remaining parts of the Hungarian economy and society would suffer devastating losses. The government's narrow-minded plans for adjusting to the EU could plunge the country into a total social and economic disaster. In order to prevent this, opposition parties claim, a principal task of the government should be the preparation of the whole of society and the economy for EU membership.

Overall, it can be concluded that the practical aspects of the European debate take an important place in the debate on policy issues. They serve as constant and ultimate points of reference. Both the opposition and governing parties - apart from the new CDPP - are convinced of their commitment to EU membership, but they are mutually suspicious of each other's policies. This feeling of mutual distrust could poison the atmosphere of the subsequent debate about the integration. Oddly enough, these adverse and fragmented ways in which basic conceptions about the EU cause clashes on specific policy issues have not yet been woven together into a more abstract or strategic debate.

5. Conclusion

As it can be seen, the term 'Europe' has a special sound for Hungarian ears. It is an eternal pipe dream, but at the same time a bogeyman. There are deeply rooted traditions with both images resting on historical experiences of the Hungarians. In personifying 'Europe', the EU is one of the greatest challenges in Hungarian history. It remains a question for the future whether Hungary will be able to rise to this challenge or miss its greatest chance of becoming part of a new Europe.

From institutional, legal and political points of view Hungary is ready for EU membership. In terms of politics and institutional arrangements, Hungary is now a consolidated democracy, with a stable party-system, and constitutional arrangements in which principles of representative democracy prevail. About 70% of Hungary's present legislation is compatible with EU requirements¹¹ and Euro-conformity is a significant

⁹*Népszabadság* (daily), 14 Oct. 1996.

¹⁰*Magyar Nemzet* (daily) 29 Aug. 1996.

¹¹Kádár, B., 'Hungary and the European Union', *The Hungarian Economy*, 24, 2-3, pp. 3-5.

aspect addressed in the legislative process. However, the road to EU membership will be rough. Without convincing economic growth and an improvement in social conditions the process of preparation for the membership could easily prove a misery for the population.

The danger of the emergence of a strong Europhobic movement is, therefore, quite high. The PHJL's re-definition as a Eurosceptic party and the CDPP's recent transformation into a hesitant Euroscepticism are the first signs and could be followed by others in a sharpening electoral competition. We have seen that there is a wide range of anti-Western conceptions in Hungarian public thinking. Although these do not yet bite on Hungarian policy, apart from the 'third way' approach, revitalised by the PHJL, it is easy to see how a wider basis for their arguments could emerge.

The lack of a strategic debate among the parties' long-term conceptions about Hungary's accession to the EU gives rise to a vacuum in Hungarian politics. Hungarian political parties have so far failed to clarify their positions in this issue both for themselves and for their voters. The neglect of this issue may revenge itself on the political parties when negotiations on the accession will inevitably intensify the debate either in the context of foreign policy or as an issue of cultural identity. Since mainstream parties have not been able to present an overall picture to the public about advantages and disadvantages of EU accession, citizens might be confused in this issue. In addition, the government's repeated reference to the meeting EU requirements as a reason for budgetary cutbacks could backlash in the future in a form of growing disaffection to Europe. The EU may come to epitomise a remote organisation demanding financial restrictions and higher taxes, while in turn it does not provide any improvement for the ordinary people.

However, because of the absent strategic debate about integration, people cannot articulate their fears or concerns through the mainstream parties. In this situation, it should be the task of the mainstream parties to offer coherent political visions about Europe. These visions would be designed to orient citizens and to disprove the bulk of misunderstanding and misbeliefs. At the same time, political parties' competing visions about Europe would provide a broader range of explanations and options for people who are concerned about the future. Uncertainty and disillusionment provide a fertile soil for radical parties to capture the citizens by reviving painful experiences about the West's 'faithlessness' or by revitalising illusions about a third way. The emergence of such an anti-European political movement might be the factor, which basically changes the course of the Hungarian-EU relations.

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