



A spectre haunting communism

With its two-thirds majority Fidesz dominates the present, with the Fundamental Laws supplanting the current Constitution it seeks to control the future, and now Fidesz seeks to make its view of history the definitive one as well. To this end, it has introduced a law on communist crimes and how belated justice might be achieved at least in some cases. The biggest problem is not with Fidesz' view of the past, though it surely would have helped if broader professional and political consultations had preceded the always volatile effort of mixing historical analysis with legislation. The real problem is that the real goal of using history as a bludgeon against Fidesz' main political rival, MSZP, is all too apparent. This undermines what could and ideally should have been a legitimate undertaking.

Having wreaked something of a mess in the economy, caught up in a controversial education reform that even some internal critics concede would do more harm than good to the area it seeks to ameliorate, Fidesz appears now ready to move on to an issue it probably understands better than any other: communism.

First the governing party announced that it was coming for the pensions of high-ranking communist apparatchiks, and now it appears ready to take on all of the former regime, and then some. The proposed amendment that the governing party wishes to adopt would – at the minimum symbolically – declare the strongest opposition party, MSZP, a criminal organisation.

Though criticism regarding these efforts is remarkably subdued – reflecting the sensitive nature of the issue and the persistent insecurity of the MSZP-friendly segment of the intelligentsia – that is not because there are no misgivings. The latter category includes legitimate concerns as well as unpalatable apologetics. Let's start with the latter.

The sleeping dogs fallacy

There is some grumbling that initiating this process two decades after the long overdue demise of communism is just too late. It is, thus the argument, impossible to mete out justice after so much time and acts seeking to address the past only stir up unrest on an issue that had appeared to be permanently settled.

Yet it is hard to see why this should be so. Addressing the injustices of the past often takes time, especially in countries where the old regime controlled the transition process and retained considerable social, financial and often even political clout. It's no accident that Argentina just now starts imprisoning former junta officials or that it took West Germany over a decade and a half after WWII to start putting perpetrators on trial.

A necessary pause of two decades?

As Germany in the 60s, Hungary too needed a post-dictatorship generation to come of age for calls of justice and reckoning to grow louder. These youths are untainted and



unperturbed by the generally unspoken moral quandary of having been bystanders to decades of oppression. Rather than admitting their perfectly understandable helplessness, many people socialised under communism prefer to think that the regime wasn't all as bad as it is made out to be in hindsight.

Except that for some it was, especially those that served as a reminder to the masses of bystanders that their misery could be a lot worse, actually. The unhappy detente between the regime and its population, the terms of which said that communists get to mismanage the economy and monopolise the public sphere in exchange for a modicum of privacy and basic rights for the masses, was reached on the backs of a brave and vocal minority whose rights were completely abrogated.

Some form of dealing with the past would therefore be necessary. But necessity unfortunately applies to several areas that the government has addressed and which are all the worse off for it.

The price of succession

Much of what Fidesz' legislative proposal says is symbolic and, on the whole, appropriate. The overall objective of finally dealing with the past takes a most unfortunate detour, however, when Fidesz proclaims that MSZP, too, shares the blame for all the crimes of its criminal predecessor, the communist MSZMP. It follows inevitably that MSZP is a criminal organisation, according to the views of Fidesz.

Two decades ago it would have been hard to argue with the proposition that MSZP shares some of MSZMP's guilt. The Socialist Party made a crucial choice in entering the democratic political scene as a legal successor to the dictatorial party. We happen to believe the claim that this was not done to express a notion of ideological continuity, but merely with a view towards retaining at least some of the perks of former rule, is mostly true. These perks, most notably the party assets, undeniably played a key role in MSZP's survival and emergence as the dominant party on the Hungarian left.

Regardless of the motivation, however, it was a morally ignoble move that showed clearly that many in the new party lacked an appreciation of the crimes of the regime and hence of the importance of severing ties with the party's dictatorial past. Still, MSZP's own political record reflects respect for democracy, even if it is hardly immune from the deficiencies that plague Hungarian politics in general. Though the slow and still incomprehensive disassociation with the past is a moral failing, it is hardly a criminal act.

Eternal and collective guilt?

More importantly, however, most of MSZP's leadership is at this point cleared of wrongdoing under the previous regime by the "grace of late birth," a quote popularised by former German chancellor Helmut Kohl. Similarly to an increasing number of young people near the top, MSZP Chairman Attila Mesterházy was not even of voting age when regime

transition took place. Even the few former communist apparatchiks left in leadership positions were minor figures in the ancien regime. That much can be said of Fidesz, too.

Fidesz might wish to argue that demonising MSZP in this form serves the purpose of protecting Hungary from aspirations of communist restoration, but that would be extremely disingenuous. There is no more of a communist threat – neither from MSZP nor from any other source – in Hungary than there is a Falangist threat emanating from the People's Party in Spain or there was a fascist threat stemming from the reformed version of the National Alliance in Italy (though the two latter are not formally successor parties, of course, that is not the relevant point of comparison here).

By legally enshrining its version of collective punishment, Fidesz is not setting a historical record straight – which would be sorely needed – but seems instead intent on mounting a political attack against the largest opposition force under the guise of legalism.

Money, money, money

The morally thorny issue is property. MSZP managed to grab a lot of it, in particular real estate. If one wants to build and maintain a national organisation, it helps to have a network of party offices that can serve as the nationally distributed loci of party activism. It's just hardware, but still very helpful as new parties repeatedly discover.

There is no way to render a completely fair judgment on this issue. Because MSZP has changed so much in its personnel and ideology, this also appears to be a question that could have been handled more ideally at a time when the gross injustice of it was more apparent. Yet even acknowledging that at the time the circumstances of regime transition would have made this a challenging undertaking at best, a solution with a clearly punitive edge would not be the most fortuitous way now.

One approach might be to balance this injustice by surveying how much MSZP “inherited” and giving other political players with some level of social support commensurate access to funds or real estate. That's merely an idea, but in fact any solution that does not appear petty and vengeful could work.

Toying with history

Fidesz' inability to deal fairly with these issues was apparent not only in parliamentary leader János Lázár's attack on his LMP counterpart, the staunchly anti-authoritarian András Schiffer, because of the role the latter's grandfather (!) played in the communist regime, but even more so in the fact that his reprehensible outburst didn't raise eyebrows in his own faction. This is a far cry from Orbán's earlier formulated vision that he wishes for Hungary to be a country where one's descent won't matter. Apparently this does not apply to communist forebears, unless of course one is now active in Fidesz, when this generally fair taboo continues to hold.

Coming to terms with the past is notoriously difficult, but it's not as if there are no workable models. Some countries, most prominently South Africa, have chosen to focus on bringing to light as much as possible, and to this end offered immunity from prosecution in exchange for detailed statements from perpetrators. Historical knowledge is indeed a key aspect of any process of dealing with the past, though Fidesz appears to hold it in rather low regard, witness the complete slashing of support for the (not sufficiently Fidesz-aligned) 1956 Institute.

A more retributive approach would also be justified, of course, assuming it is geared towards holding those accountable who are individually and certifiably guilty of crimes. While Fidesz clearly wishes to arrange for trials for the last remaining communist leaders of the 1950s, its desire to ensure that MSZP will also be at least symbolically on trial for their sins is transparently inspired by party-political motivations.

We do not wish to pretend that these are easy issues. Were it seeking a way to address them equitably, Fidesz could and should have sought to co-operate in earnest with all parties, with historians as well as whichever parts of the public wish or can be persuaded to partake in an open-ended debate. In other words, a national consultation would have been necessary, which is – at least on a rhetorical level – a Fidesz specialty. By embracing an approach that compels even LMP to step up in the defence of the Socialists, Fidesz ultimately uses this question as just another wedge issue to divide left and right in Hungary. Unless Fidesz miscalculates, which is a distinct possibility, this may serve its short-term political interests. But it serves neither justice nor healing.