



## 1989 a Hungarian Revolution?

### The Hungarian Debate on 1989

Árpád von Klimó

Cultures of History Forum, published: 14.01.2014

DOI: 10.25626/0012

The debate on the significance of the events of 1989 has so far taken place only within the realm of politics. The governing Fidesz party is attempting to reinterpret the events, which up to now have been ascribed a mostly positive connotation, and to re-tell them and the subsequent period of transition as a period of crisis that ended only with Viktor Orbán's victory in the elections of 2010. The article scrutinizes why the new interpretations of 1989 are relatively popular and wonders why academic circles have not reacted much to the issues raised.

#### Recommended Citation

Árpád von Klimó: The Hungarian Debate on 1989. In: Cultures of History Forum (14.01.2014), DOI: 10.25626/0012

Copyright (c) 2014 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the copyright holders. For permission please contact the editors.

## The Hungarian Debate on 1989

The debate on the significance of the events of 1989, usually referred to in Hungary as "regime change" (rendszer váltás), has taken place up to now largely within the realm of politics. In particular the governing Fidesz party around Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is attempting to reinterpret the events—which up to now have been ascribed a mostly positive connotation—and view them and the subsequent period of transition as a period of crisis that did not come to an end until Orbán won a landslide victory in 2010 (Hungary's "revolution in the voting booth"). This national reinterpretation is popular, because many Hungarians hold a negative view of the developments since 1989, often characterized as the "return to Europe." However, hardly any debate on 1989 has yet emerged within the rather liberally minded academic world, although this situation will presumably change in the coming years.

### "Return to Europe": 1989 and European Integration

Hardly twenty-five years after the radical changes in East Central Europe and almost a decade after Hungary's accession into the European Union, the general euphoria over the "return to Europe"<sup>[1]</sup>, which in 1989 was still celebrated everywhere, seems to have faded.<sup>[2]</sup> More and more politicians and intellectuals of all shades are referring negatively to the changes usually referred to in Hungary as "regime change"; and that is not all: In a survey, less than half of the Hungarian respondents assessed the changes since 1989 as positive, in contrast to almost three-quarters of participating Poles and Czechs.<sup>[3]</sup> The crisis facing the Hungarian democracy, which was first manifested publicly in the fall of 2006 in mass demonstrations and isolated acts of violence, is seen as closely tied to the present financial, economic, and political crisis of the European Union, and to the purported new master narrative of the "decline of the West".<sup>[4]</sup>

However, political party researchers also explain the increasing distance to the European Union, in particular among conservative parties in East Central Europe, as owing to the fact that the socialist successor parties of the former communist regime since 1990 have evolved more and more into strong EU advocates, also in order to give themselves a new image that is more popular in the West.<sup>[5]</sup> Long after 1989, all democratic parties were still clearly pro-Europe, as "Europe" was seen as the only alternative after the collapse of socialism. At the same time, from "Europe", especially (West) Germany (and the United States), came strong expectations about how totalitarian pasts were to be dealt with.<sup>[6]</sup> This expanded-European or even global-context is key regarding the interpretation of the regime change in Hungary, because, in contrast to the revolution of 1956, it is difficult to view Hungary's 1989 in isolation, as a purely national event.<sup>[7]</sup> Also, the Hungarian nation has always been defined in relation to "Europe". Therefore, interpretations of 1989 are excellently suited for people to distinguish themselves in the field of politics with statements about the nation and its qualities. In the following, I will attempt to explain why the academic world is having far greater difficulties doing this.

### "Hungarian Revolution" 2010—Orbán and the Ambivalence toward 1989

Ever since the landslide victory of his party, Fidesz (Federation of Young Democrats), in the parliamentary elections in 2010, the present head of state Viktor Orbán has spoken of a "revolution in the voting booth (fűlkeforradalom)", which he says gave him the task of bringing radical change to his country.<sup>[8]</sup> This appraisal of the elections in 2010 has political consequences for historical interpretations

of the regime change in 1989. When Orbán speaks of the "revolution" of 2010, he means two things: first, that 1989 was not a revolution, and, second, that 1989 was not a Hungarian revolution.

The word "revolution" is in fact seldom used in Hungary-in contrast to the former East Germany or Czechoslovakia. The transition to a new regime came step by step in Hungary, starting around 1985 or 1987, and a large majority of the population was not involved in it. There were no mass demonstrations. Furthermore, according to Viktor Orbán, these changes led to "insecurity" within Hungarian society.<sup>[9]</sup> He explained this development on the basis of the coercive character and alienness of the communist system, which had stripped Hungarian society of its self-respect. This is of course a major simplification, which does not do justice in particular to the different phases of the dictatorship-brutal Stalinism in the 1950s and then increasing liberalization starting in the 1960s under János Kádár. Also, the relationship between communism and the Hungarian nation was far more complex than as portrayed by Orbán.<sup>[10]</sup> But this is not about history, it is a matter of disparaging a political opponent.

On the other hand, Viktor Orbán and Fidesz cannot completely reject the "regime change" of 1988-90. First of all, the Fidesz movement was founded in 1988 and it was in summer 1989 when Orbán had his first major public appearance in Hungary, at the ceremony marking the reburial of executed heroes of the revolution of 1956.<sup>[11]</sup>

Secondly, this was Orbán's way of saying that 1989 was not a Hungarian revolution, such as the one of 1956. Speaking of "Hungary's rebirth" stresses the national aspect and underscores the fact that the changes from that point on were not to follow a "foreign", "eastern", or "western" model, but should come from Hungary itself. The present atmosphere, as mentioned earlier in this article, accompanied by anti-western and anti-European sentiments, and the noncritical pro-Western attitudes of the socialist-liberal camp that was in power until 2010 in Hungary, also explain in part the monumental success of Fidesz in the last elections. Orbán succeeded in presenting the widespread dissatisfaction in the political system and the consequences of the introduction of a capitalist market economy, which led to the impoverishment of broad segments of the population, as a national message that speaks to very many Hungarians. In any case, the long-standing socio-liberal prerogative of interpretation about contemporary history appears to have been broken.<sup>[12]</sup>

Hungary's new Fundamental Law (HFL), which Fidesz brought through the parliament in April 2011 with a two-thirds' majority, is also characterized by ambivalence toward the legacy of 1989: On the one hand, Hungary is described as part of the European Union (Art. E, HFL), and its Fundamental Law contains aspects of European law.<sup>[13]</sup> On the other hand, the "Hungarian nation" (or the two-thirds' majority of the votes of the Members of Parliament) is obliged to return to its old, "historical constitution."<sup>[14]</sup> The thousand-year history of Hungary is thus shifted to the center of today's Hungarian politics, whereas the "tyrannical rule" of communism and the short-lived dictatorship of the Arrow Cross Party during the occupation by German troops has been factored out of the continuity of Hungary's national history.

With reference to the regime change in 1989, the following is stated in the National Avowal, which is the preamble to the Fundamental Law:

"We agree with the members of the first free Parliament, which proclaimed as its first decision that our current liberty was born of our 1956 Revolution. We date the restoration of our country's self-determination, lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944, from the second day of May 1990, when the first freely elected body of popular representation was formed. We shall consider this date to be the

beginning of our country's new democracy and constitutional order."<sup>[15]</sup>

Thus the democracy began in May 1990, whereby the regime change is appreciated only with respect to its end; and 1989, like the Arrow Cross Party dictatorship and communism, is omitted from Hungary's national history.

After the verbal attacks, the Orbán government recently (March 2013) created a *fait accompli* by passing a law that created an Archives and Research Institute for the History of the Hungarian Regime Change.<sup>[16]</sup> The institute is to be affiliated with the Office of the Prime Minister, and the politically active literary scholar Zoltán Biró will be the director. Critical observers thus expect a largely negative presentation of 1989 that is agreeable to the political leadership rather than serious historical research.<sup>[17]</sup> The 1956 institute, which in the last twenty years brought forth the most important contributions to contemporary history, was already bled dry financially and incorporated into the National Library, which means restrictions in its research activities.

## 1989 and Hungarian Historiography: Regime Change or Revolution?

In contrast to politics, within the academic disciplines (political science, sociology, contemporary history, anthropology) that are concerned with recent Hungarian history, there have to date not been any major debates on the events of 1989-90. This is all the more surprising as there has been a veritable flood of publications, mostly detailed accounts, source materials (such as the minutes of the Round Table talks), micropolitical analyses, and in particular also many subjective appraisals (memoirs, autobiographies, etc.) on the subject of regime change.<sup>[18]</sup>

I believe the lack of any major debate has to do with the fact that the Hungarian "regime change" cannot be explained outside of the international, or to be more precise: global and European context. At the same time, however, events in Eastern and Western Europe were also influenced by developments in Hungary: the gradual end of the Kádár era, the rise of reform socialists starting in the mid-1980s, the emergence of oppositional movements and their contacts to Western Europe and the United States.<sup>[19]</sup> This complex meshing of global, European, national, regional, and local events and developments makes it extraordinarily difficult in general to write a history of 1989.<sup>[20]</sup>

A major academic debate on 1989 in Hungary might also be lacking because the academic sphere has largely liberal leanings, whereas so far only isolated Marxist, conservative, and nationalist voices have been expressed. From a liberal perspective, 1989 has been interpreted predominantly as positive, as the end of a repressive regime and the dawn of a new, liberal era, which is why the term "revolution" is often used. This positive interpretation prevailed for a long time, yet criticism is growing. Tamás Krausz, a leftist historian of Eastern Europe, recently said that research on the regime change has up to now been mostly a pseudo-historical legitimization of the neoliberal elite that has been predominant since 1989.<sup>[21]</sup>

Exemplary of the historical research that exists to date in Hungary is the often-cited book by Zoltán Ripp, *Rendszerváltás Magyarországon, 1987-90*, which was published in 2006. In it, Ripp, who works at the Socialist Party think-tank (Politikatörténeti Intézet), describes the political events and discussions in detail, mainly the debates within the Communist Party and the most significant oppositional groups. The author uses the narrative of the revolution, such as when he speaks of overcoming the *ancien régime*. Consistently, Ripp recently accused the Orbán government of having initiated a counter-revolution.<sup>[22]</sup> However, he is interested above all in better understanding the current political

problems (especially those of his own party).

Another book that is frequently cited, "From Dictatorship to Democracy: The Birth of the Third Hungarian Republic, 1988-2001", by Ignác Romsics, was published in Hungarian in 2003. It is more of a historical study, but it too led not to a controversy, but instead found widespread approval.<sup>[23]</sup> Romsics credits the democratic opposition with persuading the reform communists to make greater concessions in the Round Table talks of 1989.<sup>[24]</sup> Behind this lies the interpretation of a "negotiated" or "brokered revolution" or, as Timothy Garton Ash put it, a "refolution" ("half-reform, half-revolution").<sup>[25]</sup> Others, such as political scientist András Bozóki and military historian Béla K. Király, who taught in the United States and died in 2009, spoke of a "constitutional" or "lawful revolution", emphasizing the peacefulness of the transition and the consensus of communist reformers and the opposition.<sup>[26]</sup> This description was appropriated especially by the socialist-liberal coalition.

Andreas Schmidt-Schweizer, a German historian working in Budapest, however, contradicts the notion of a "negotiated revolution". According to Schmidt-Schweizer, the most important decisions regarding the system transformation were made as early as 1988 within the state party, that is, before the opposition emerged and the Round Table talks took place.<sup>[27]</sup>

This is a small-scale reiteration of the debate between Timothy Garton Ash and Stephen Kotkin on the major upheaval in world history in 1989; Kotkin too regards the role of the opposition-with Poland as the lone exception-as insignificant with respect to the events of 1989.<sup>[28]</sup> Conservative Hungarian scholars, such as political scientist Tamás Fricz and historian Mária Schmidt, director of the House of Terror in Budapest, on the other hand, criticize in particular the continuity of the elite beyond 1989, so they too reject the term "revolution".<sup>[29]</sup> However, most recently, the same Maria Schmidt speaks of 1989 as a "success story" in as far as it was an "anti-Communist" revolution "bringing" "national independence".<sup>[30]</sup>

Despite the examples mentioned here, one cannot speak of a Hungarian historian debate on 1989. The openness of the times since 1989 and the large volume of sources and publications that have been available represent a great challenge for historians-not only traditional historicist or positivist-thinking ones. It remains to be seen if the significant political changes since 2010 have any effect on this. The continued development of the European Union should not be underestimated here.

Translated by [Allison Brown](#)

## Footnotes

1. For criticism of a glorification of the complex process of European integration, see Mark Gilbert, *Narrating the Process: Questioning the Progressive Story of European Integration*, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 46, no. 3 (2008): 641-662.
2. I would like to thank Victoria Harms, Attila Pók, and Eszter Zsófia Tóth for their ideas and criticism.
3. The representative survey of 1000 people was carried out in late 2009. On this see Árpád von Klimó, Hungary, in *Authoritarianism: History and Democratic Dispositions in Austria, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic*, edited by Oliver Rathkolb and Günther Ogris, Innsbruck etc.: 2010, pp. 79-90, here 82.
4. See Vincent Della Sala, *Crisis, What Crisis? Narrating Crisis and Decline in the European Union*, paper presented to ECPR Standing Group on the European Union Conference, Porto (24-26 June 2010), retrieved 29 July 2013, URL: <http://www.jhubc.it/ecpr-porto/virtualpaperroom/140.pdf>.
5. See e.g. the study by Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak, *Parties, Positions and Europe: Euroscepticism in the EU Candidate States*, SEI Working Paper no. 46, retrieved 6 August 2013, URL: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/sei-working-paper-no-46.pdf>. On Hungary, see Agnes Batory, *The Politics of EU Accession: Ideology, Party Strategy and the European Question in Hungary*, Manchester and New York: 2008.
6. See James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*, New Haven etc.: 2010; Stefan Troebst, *Jalta versus Stalingrad, GULag versus Holocaust: konfliktierende Erinnerungskulturen im größeren Europa [Yalta versus Stalingrad, GULag versus Holocaust: Conflicting Recollection Cultures in the Enlarged Europe]*, *Medien & Zeit: Kommunikation in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* 21, no. 1 (2006): 4-19.
7. On this, see the recent publication János M. Rainer, *Bevezetés a Kádárizmusba [Introduction to Kádárism]*, Budapest: 2011, p. 230.
8. See his speech of March 15, 2010, the anniversary of the 1848 revolution, 11 April 2010 is Our Revolution, 15 March 2010, retrieved 14 January 2015, URL: [http://www.orbanviktor.hu/in\\_english\\_article/11\\_april\\_2010\\_is\\_our\\_revolution](http://www.orbanviktor.hu/in_english_article/11_april_2010_is_our_revolution).
9. See Viktor Orbán, *Wir Ungarn gewinnen die Selbstachtung zurück*, *Die Welt* (5 May 2011), retrieved 14 January 2015, URL: <http://www.welt.de/debatte/article13340784/Wir-Ungarn-gewinnen-die-Selbstachtung-zurueck.html>.
10. See Martin Mevius, *Agents of Moscow: The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism 1941-1953*, Oxford: 2005.
11. His speech on that occasion can be heard on YouTube, retrieved 9 August 2013, URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fef2FmTS0NE>.
12. On the complex connection between the memory politics of the parties and the attempts to rewrite one's own biography along the lines of the conflicting master narratives, see Mark.
13. The English version of the constitution, which entered into force on January 1, 2012 (version: April 25, 2011) can be accessed at the Website of the Hungarian government, retrieved 14 January 2015, URL: <http://www.kormany.hu/download/e/02/00000/The%20New%20Fundamental%20Law%20of%20Hungary.pdf>, Hereafter: HFL (Hungarian Fundamental Law).
14. "We honour the achievements of our historical constitution and we honour the Holy Crown, which embodies the constitutional continuity of Hungary's statehood and the unity of the nation"; see HFL.
15. The National Avowal can be read online in English, see HFL.
16. The official webpage of the Research Institute and Archives for the History of the Hungarian regime change, URL: <http://www.retorki.hu/menu/about-us?lang=en>.
17. For example in HVG, the Hungarian weekly economic and political magazine, József Kajdi, Bíró Zoltán és a rendszerváltás: nicsak, ki kutat? *Heti Világgazdaság* (2 July 2013), retrieved 14 January 2015, URL: [http://hvg.hu/velemeney/20130702\\_Biro\\_Zoltan\\_es\\_a\\_rendszervaltas\\_nicsak\\_ki](http://hvg.hu/velemeney/20130702_Biro_Zoltan_es_a_rendszervaltas_nicsak_ki).
18. The 1956 Institute has a comprehensive online bibliography, *A magyar rendszerváltás bibliográfiája*, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár 1956-os Intézet és Oral History Archivum, retrieved 7 August 2013, URL: [http://www.rev.hu/89/f?p=107:15:3055982072544617::NO:RP\\_12](http://www.rev.hu/89/f?p=107:15:3055982072544617::NO:RP_12). For a survey of the debate see János M. Rainer, *Ötvenhat és Nyolcvankilenc- a XXI. Századból nézve*, in Rainer, *Bevezetés*, 217-239.
19. See Victoria Harms, *Living Mitteleuropa in the 1980s: a network of Hungarian and West German Intellectuals*, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 19, no. 5 (2012): 669-692.
20. This was the conclusion drawn by [Timothy Garton Ash](#) in his review of a series of books on 1989, 1989!, *New York Review of Books* (5 November 2009), retrieved 7 August 2013, URL: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/nov/05/1989/?pagination=false>. See also Mária Ormos, *Rendszerváltás és háttére*, in *Múlt a jelenben*, by Mária Ormos, Budapest: 2013, pp. 242-258.
21. Theses on the history of regime change, see Tamás Krausz, *Tézisek a rendszerváltás történeti értelmezéséhez*, mebal.hu (23 June 2012), retrieved 7 August 2013, URL: <http://mebal.hu/index.php/mebal-blog/59-tudastar/egyeb-fontos/478-krausz-tamas-tezisek-a-rendszervaltas-toertenet-ertelmezesehez>; for the English version, see Tamás Krausz, *A revolution which never was: from state socialism to multinational capitalism*, *Attac* (31 October 2011), retrieved 16 February 2015,

- URL: <http://www.attac.org/fr/node/7293>.
22. See A rendszerváltó ellenforradalom száz napja, Népszava (4 September 2010), retrieved 7 August 2013, URL: <http://www.nepszava.hu/articles/article.php?id=342706>.
  23. Ignác Romsics, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: The Birth of the Third Hungarian Republic, 1988-2001*, translated by Matthew Caples, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007; Hungarian original: Ignác Romsics, *Volt egyszer egy rendszerváltás*, Budapest: 2003.
  24. Similarly, see also John W. Schiemann, *The Politics of Pact-Making: Hungary's Negotiated Transition to Democracy in Comparative Perspective*, Houndsmills and New York: 2005.
  25. See Rudolf Tökés, *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution: Economic Reform, Social Change and Political Succession*, Cambridge: 1996; László Bruszt and George K. Horvath, 1989: *The Negotiated Revolution in Hungary*, *Social Research* (1990): 365-387. On the problems associated with the term "revolution" see Philipp Ther, 1989 - eine ausgehandelte Revolution, Version: 1.0, *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* (11 February 2010), retrieved 7 August 2013, URL: <http://docupedia.de/zg/1989>; Timothy Garton Ash, *Revolution in Hungary and Poland*, *New York Review of Books* (17 August 1989), retrieved 14 January 2015, URL: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1989/aug/17/revolution-in-hungary-and-poland/?pagination=false>.
  26. See Béla K. Király and András Bozóki, eds., *Lawful Revolution in Hungary, 1989-94*, Boulder, CO: 1995; András Bozóki, 1989 - Az alkotmányos forradalom éve, *Út a rendszerváltás felé*. *Rubicon XV*, no. 5-6 (2004): 57-63.
  27. See Andreas Schmidt-Schweizer, *Politische Geschichte Ungarns von 1985 bis 2002: Von der liberalisierten Einparteiherrschaft zur Demokratie in der Konsolidierungsphase*, München: 2007.
  28. See Stephen Kotkin, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, New York: 2009. On this debate see also Ther.
  29. Tamás Fricz, *Die alte Elite im neuen demokratischen Ungarn*, in *Alte Eliten in jungen Demokratien? Wechsel, Wandel und Kontinuität in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, edited by Hans-Joachim Veen, Köln: 2004, pp. 285-307; Mária Schmidt, *Ungarn zwölf Jahre nach 1918, 1945 und 1989*, in *ibid.*, pp. 85-99.
  30. See Mária Schmidt, *Antikommunista forradalom és nemzeti függetlenség*, [schmidtmaria.hu](http://www.schmidtmaria.hu/szakma/cikkek/publikaciok/kozos_siker.html) (23 December 2013), retrieved 14 January 2015, URL: [http://www.schmidtmaria.hu/szakma/cikkek/publikaciok/kozos\\_siker.html](http://www.schmidtmaria.hu/szakma/cikkek/publikaciok/kozos_siker.html).

