HUNGARY: BETWEEN CONSOLIDATED AND SIMULATED DEMOCRACY

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TV broadcasting studios besieged, hate speech in the streets, political leaders calling each other liars – this was the situation during 2006 in Hungary. Most local and foreign political observers had, for many years, regarded Hungary as the foremost example of a smooth transition from state socialism to democracy, the most consolidated democracy in East Central Europe, and the most successful locus for foreign investment in the region. But in 2006 this highly positive view of Hungary went up in smoke as political elite consensus and citizen morale attenuated greatly. Why did this happen? Why did Hungary’s democracy suddenly exhibit marked frailties? In this chapter we argue that the answer lies primarily in changed behaviors of political elites. The changes highlight democratic elitism’s shortcomings in Hungary, with disturbing parallels in adjacent East Central European countries.

Early in the 20th century a Hungarian sociologist, Lajos Leopold, argued that capitalism in Hungary had a “simulated” character because rent-seeking capitalists were tied firmly to the state and thus dependent on state subsidies (Leopold (1918)1988). Borrowing Leopold’s term, we ask if the post-transition Hungarian political system is a simulated democracy. Behind its scenery of democratic institutions, elite adherence to the norms and rules essential for robust democracy remain ragged and unsettled. Political elites mouth fidelities to democratic norms and rules but deviate from them in actions. To the extent that this elite behavior is also occurring in Hungary’s Czech, Polish, and Slovak neighbors, the concept of simulated democracy may constitute a useful addition to the sub-types of democracy that are distinguished in comparative political analysis (Carothers 2002).

Political scientists have written extensively about requirements for democratic consolidation. As is well known, Juan Linz and Alfred

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Stepan (1996:6) stipulated that consolidated democracy involves the common elite view that democracy is “the only game in town”. In addition, elite integrity and openness are regarded as essential to the workings of political institutions in a consolidated democracy (Welzel 2002; Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

In a simulated democracy significant groups of elites and segments of society just imitate the acceptance of democratic norms and game rules. We argue that the particularities of elite behavior, most importantly the breaching of democracy’s norms, justify introducing this subtype. In a simulated democracy, however, elite behaviors that breach norms do not destroy democratic institutions. Such institutions are not mere façades and they continue to operate – an independent judiciary and the equality of individuals and minority groups before the law, competitive elections, pluralistic media, civilian control of the military and state security agencies, etc. (Diamond 2008:21-25). But elite behavior makes institutional working relatively ineffective and precarious. A simulated democracy is still a democracy but it has characteristics and qualities that fall well short of consolidated democracy.

To these considerations can be added the proposition put forth by John Higley and his colleagues that the lack of an underlying and mostly tacit elite consensus about democratic game rules can be fatal for democratic stability (Higley and Pakulski 2002; Higley and Burton 2006). If important elite groups begin to doubt that other groups accept democracy as the common denominator and come to suspect that these others are pursuing narrow partisan interests regardless of the harm done to democratic game rules, then one cannot speak of consolidated democracy. Elite groups that once shared an accommodation become disillusioned when several of them cater to populist interlopers and adopt populist stratagems. In short, the elite competitions described by democratic elitism become less restrained and more zero-sum. This appears to have happened in Hungary during the past several years. We will review these Hungarian developments, consider why they have occurred, and ask if they are part of a wider pattern among elites in East Central Europe.

*Signs and Sources of Crisis*

There are several possible explanations why politics in Hungary and neighboring post-socialist countries have become more turbulent. One is that after achieving long-awaited membership of the European