

Letter from Hungary

Cathy Lowy

The far-right in Hungary is resurgent. Not only has the open expression of antisemitic, anti-Roma and homophobic sentiment become more acceptable, even in circles tending toward the centre, but the forums for those expressions have grown in number, even as they have become more extreme. In recent times, as well as the political party of the far-right, Jobbik (a pun on the words ‘better’ and ‘right’), a number of extremist groups have emerged, not least on the internet. They openly celebrate the symbols and leaders of Hungary’s racist, and eventually genocidal, 20th century past. Most ominous is the establishment of the Hungarian Guard, a uniformed militia with an agenda of intimidation underlying its slogan, ‘protection for Hungary and Hungarians.’

Left-leaning commentators bemoan the fact that the major opposition party FIDESZ, is dependent on the extremists for a parliamentary majority. This dependence is seen to explain much of the reluctance of FIDESZ to reject far-right manifestations such as recent anti-Roma marches by the Hungarian Guard in villages with substantial Roma populations. The same commentators look for the causes of the current resurgence of right extremism in large gaps in the historical education of the generations not directly affected by Nazism. A willing audience for an extreme nationalist and racist historical narrative is the consequence. This narrative emphasises the losses which Hungary bore as a consequence of the Treaty of Versailles as well as its Stalinist past. In the mix might be added a discussion of the deleterious effects of globalisation. ‘Globalisation,’ in this context, has replaced ‘cosmopolitanism’ as the code word for the role of Jews in the country.

The rise of the far-right affects the whole fabric of the country in a number of ways, from the streets to the highest court in the land, as the following cases illustrate.

The battle for Uj-Lipotvaros

Our hotel is an old boat moored on the Pest side of the Danube. Above the river is the thirteenth district of Budapest, an inner city area known as Uj-Lipotvaros. This is an area of closely packed blocks of flats built in modernist styles of the 1920s-1940s. A bourgeois area both before the War and after, there are many small shops and restaurants. Cake shops and hairdressers fight it out for dominance. An

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old lady I knew was offered something bigger and better than her tiny flat here, in some other district. She moved and died soon after. Her friends were not surprised. The area has strong Jewish and intellectual associations. She was neither. It was just that it was her village, as it is for most of the people who live here.

The walls of the blocks of flats used to be pockmarked with the shrapnel wounds of the War and the '56 Revolution. These days they have been spruced up by the mostly affluent groups of flat owners. The lifts still creek, but the ubiquitous concierges have been replaced by electronics. This is desirable real estate.

Into this quiet and somewhat privileged corner of Budapest came violence in April. One of the little conveniences of the area is a small ticket agency. This little shop was the unlikely focus of the violence, even though the 'action' seems to have been against Uj-Lipotvaros, rather than the shop. A young woman, later found to have far-right connections, was asked to leave the shop. She had asked for tickets to a concert by an openly racist band, to which no tickets were held by the agency. She was asked to leave when she insisted on her right to tickets for her event. The bloggers followed up the provocation under the heading, 'Hungarians don't get served here.' A week later an incendiary bomb destroyed much of the shop. With much local help it was quickly restored to operation. A 'protest' against the ticket agency was conceived. The plan was to gather as many young members of the far-right as possible to 'buy' tickets to the concert. About forty turned up suitably dressed in T-shirts printed with a portrait of Hitler. They were met by a group of four hundred counter-protestors and a large group of police to keep the two groups apart. 'Nazis go home,' rang out. After some consideration of the situation, they went home. Reports say that the counter-protestors were having such a good time catching up, that the police had difficulty getting them to disperse.

Those who did not finish their chat had another chance a few days later. This time, having given up the pretence of buying tickets, a far-right group of about 1000 met at a more open space, still in Uj-Lipotvaros. They were met by about 3500 people under the anti-Nazi banners. This was an informal coalition of leftists, Jews, and a smaller number of enraged conservatives. The protesters screamed racist insults and the anti-protest read poetry. The Prime Minister as well as the President turned up.

Since then, the citizens of Uj-Lipotvaros may drink their coffees and push their prams in quiet. The ticket agency sells tickets to symphony concerts undisturbed. In Uj-Lipotvaros the anti-fascists can be said to have won the battle. But then, they

had home ground advantage. What of the rest of the country?

A new statue for Debrecen

The city authorities of the significant provincial university city of Debrecen have recently erected a statue honouring the minor racist writer Albert Wass. Wass had no connections with Debrecen, as opposed to the great Hungarian poet Endre Ady whose statue is also part of the streetscape. Wass is something of a cult figure of the Hungarian far-right. His writing is notable not for any literary merit, but rather for its nationalistic and anti-Semitic content. Wass was the recipient of two German iron cross decorations for his journalistic activities during the War. At war's end, he was sentenced to death by the Romanians for his activities in the deportation of Transylvanian Jews to the death camps. He escaped to the United States where he joined extreme right émigré movements and continued to write anti-Semitic works of little literary value. In those cases when he was unable to publish, he blamed the Jewish control of the émigré media.

The new statue for Debrecen is especially significant because it has official backing from the right wing of the FIDESZ national opposition as represented by the local government of Debrecen and especially its Mayor. At the same time, this case is indicative of what kinds of public commemoration now considered to be appropriate in Hungary.

Hate-speech legislation and the Constitutional Court

Not for the first time, hate-speech legislation has recently been unsuccessfully introduced in the Hungarian Parliament. It has been rejected by both the President and the Constitutional Court. The Court suggested that the proposed legislation was unconstitutional even if the speech targeted was offensive and damaging to human dignity. In the view of the Court, the criminal law is only applicable in the case where there is obvious and immediate harm to the person. Hate-speech does not come into this category. Also rejected by the Court was the suggestion that civil actions are suitable as recourse for individuals or groups who are subjected to hate-speech. The Court argued that matters of human dignity apply only to the individuals affected, rather than the group to whom the hate-speech is directed. Thus the only resort is civil action by individuals, where there is a requirement of proof of harm. Previous cases suggest that offensive use of ethnic origin or sexual preference is not sufficient.

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The Court makes mention of the fact that as a consequence of international treaties to which Hungary is signatory, the spreading of ideas based on racial superiority or racial hatred should be punishable. It also rejects the view that all expression, irrespective of the values expressed and the relationship to truth, should be protected. Commentators have noted that the Court has not indicated any practical ways in which these principles might be put into effect. Some suggest that there is a lack of trust in the ability of the current political system to guard against abuse of restrictions on the freedom of speech.

Although there is a theoretical discussion in some circles about restrictions on the freedom of speech, much of the general debate between proponents and opponents of hate-speech legislation divides on political lines, in the same way as much else in this politically polarised country. For the moment there is no legal impediment to the hate-speech of the far-right in Hungary.

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