

# Hungary's Nostalgia for a Revolution

készítette: Matt Perlman

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Recent riots in the country owe more to a national sense of history than to economic circumstances.

Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány bent the truth a little. Alright, a lot: “We have obviously lied throughout the past 18 to 24 months. It was perfectly clear that what we were saying was not true,” he told members of his ruling Socialist Party at an internal meeting this May. “We lied morning, noon, and night.” The fact of the lying might not seem surprising—don’t politicians always conceal unpleasant realities from a public that often doesn’t want to hear them? Yet the admission was unusual, and so was the reaction.

When a recording of Gyurcsány’s blunt, profanity-laced tirade emerged on September 17, Hungarians took to the streets in unprecedented numbers demanding his resignation. For over a month, thousands of outraged demonstrators engulfed Budapest’s Kossuth Square and other main thoroughfares of the capital, and like-minded compatriots throughout the country turned out in solidarity. On October 23, planned celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolt deteriorated into hideous confrontations between protestors and police. Flying debris, barricades, tear gas, and rubber bullets, along with hundreds of injuries and widespread accusations of police brutality, marked the worst violence in the country since the Soviet tank assault on Budapest fifty years ago.

How could one little speech ignite so much tension? It was undeniably scandalous: Gyurcsány implied that he and his party had concealed Hungary’s precarious fiscal situation from the public in order to win parliamentary elections that took place in April. In the Prime Minister’s estimation, only “divine providence, the abundance of cash in the world economy, and hundreds of tricks” had postponed the day of reckoning for years of overspending and a fiscal deficit in excess of ten percent of GDP. “This,” he warned, “cannot go on.” Apparently, even the leader of some of Europe’s most prodigal politicians could see that Hungary was living beyond its means. Accordingly, over the summer Gyurcsány unveiled his “New Equilibrium” plan, a package of austerity measures ranging from spending cuts and tax increases to longer-term restructuring of public finances.

It was not the substance of Gyurcsány's message but rather its tone that provided the spark: his casual attitude toward misleading the public, his patronizing belief that the electorate would never hold his party to account, and above all, the contemptuous language he reserved for Hungary itself.

The left's newfound restraint comes despite the fact that, at least on the surface, the public debt hasn't given Hungarians much reason to protest. Indeed, generous government disbursement has helped the economy register comfortable real GDP growth of more than four percent each of the last five years, boosting wages to about \$750 a month—quite decent for the region. The latest report out of the statistics office puts unemployment at 7.4 percent, which compares favorably with both the Euro area and other Central European countries such as Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Further, the generous layer of largesse smeared on the economy has yet to show up in consumer prices, which, according to government projections, will have crept up a modest four percent by year's end. None of this has stopped some Budapest spectators, including Western media, from offering economic explanations for the mess in the capital, characterizing the unrest as a paroxysm of frustration among those not lifted up by buoyant economic growth.

Professor László Csaba of Budapest's Central European University is skeptical. An expert on European political economy and a longtime observer of Hungary's political scene, he rejects the economic interpretation, calling the response to the speech “deeply emotional, moral, and non-material.” According to this theory, it was not the substance of Gyurcsány's message but rather its tone that provided the spark: his casual attitude toward misleading the public, his patronizing belief that the electorate would never hold his party to account, and above all, the contemptuous language he reserved for Hungary itself. “If you call your homeland a country of whores,” says Csaba, citing one translation of Gyurcsány's colorful terminology, “you should emigrate.” The impetus for the Budapest conflagration came not from an underdeveloped economic periphery, but from mainstream Hungarians' ferocious love of their nation. The sea of flags, coats of arms, and images of “Greater Hungary” (detailing the borders of the pre-World War I kingdom) in the streets of Budapest this fall provided ample evidence for Csaba's account. Gyurcsány never should have expected to get away with brazenly flinging expletives at such a profoundly patriotic country.

Moreover, the speech's phraseology evoked one of the most famous slogans of 1956, uttered over public airwaves after the Communist government fell. “For over a decade we've been lying day and night,” Hungarians were told, the implication being that those doing the lying had been forced out and were no longer in control. So when Gyurcsány echoed these words fifty years later, he issued a symbolic call to arms—and residents in the capital responded immediately. While no one would mistake today's mobs for Imre Nagy and the citizen warriors who died trying to reform orthodox communism, demonstrators certainly exhibited a consciousness of the parallels with their forebears. Chants, revolutionary hymns, even graffiti—“Every day is 1956”—showed a desire to channel the Hungarian tradition of revolution.

Hungarians are highly attuned to such historical connections in a way that is not well understood in the West; even the youngest are aware of their country's often bitter past. Walking through an elementary school on downtown Pest's Nádor Street, the walls convey both national pride and a sense of tragedy: a

felt collage of the Crown of St. Stephen, the revered symbol of Hungary's medieval glory, hangs along with pencil drawings of the martyrs of the failed 1848 War of Independence against the Austrians. A red, white and green Hungarian flag with the center cut out commemorates the famous standard of 1956, from which the revolutionaries had defiantly removed the Soviet hammer and sickle. In stark contrast to the triumphant founding mythology that Americans inculcate in their schoolchildren, Hungary's patriotic narrative tells of defeat and anger: something has been taken from us. It should not be surprising that Hungarians retain a latent propensity for violent upheaval, which erupted when something about Gyurcsány's glib account of lies and manipulation reminded them of the undemocratic, externally imposed regimes of the past.

Yet the Prime Minister seems to have endured the wrath of a spited populace, at least for now. As he cynically predicted in the speech that started it all, the crowds have petered out and the gatherings have ceased. Soccer hooligan vandals have been rounded up, and the circus of extreme-right knuckleheads encamped in front of Parliament has been cleared out. No 1956-style tank onslaught was needed to end the revolt; this time, domestic parliamentary politics did the job. Fidesz, the conservative opposition, failed to capitalize in municipal elections, and Gyurcsány survived a confidence vote on October 6. The only way he could be ousted now would be for the Socialists' coalition partners, the Free Democrats, to switch sides—an impossibility in Hungary's polarized political climate. Otherwise, the Socialists must replace Gyurcsány internally, and so far they're keeping him around.

Make no mistake, though: the party has been substantially weakened. The population is still seething, and there is little hope that a figure as unpopular as Gyurcsány can successfully push a still more unpopular platform of cutting spending on pensions, health care, and unemployment benefits. The Socialists have spent their four years in power convincing Hungarians that they would not have to undergo further sacrifices after the Bokros austerity package of 1995, and if leaking the speech was Gyurcsány's way of belatedly preparing the public for belt-tightening, as some have speculated, his strategy has backfired horribly. To make matters worse, the inevitable economic correction could come as soon as next year, ushering in an inflationary, low-growth environment that would further restrict the chances of reform. The government's pledge to trim the fiscal deficit to three percent of GDP by 2009 is now dubious at best, and the prospect of adopting the Euro—the ultimate prize of EU membership—has receded into the indefinite future.

That's a shame, because Hungary is missing a crucial opportunity not only to appropriate the financial stability of the Euro, but also to pare down the bloated welfare state, the unfortunate legacy of János Kádár's "goulash socialism." Hungary's former dictator took the lessons of the 1956 cataclysm to heart, securing the population's acquiescence with plentiful social benefits and subsidized consumption. If there is any connection between Budapest's recent "mini-revolution" and the genuine article fifty years ago, it is that this fall's events reconfirmed among politicians the fear of upheaval that underlay Kádár's social policies, and that still prevents them from honestly addressing the excesses of welfare capitalism. In order to finally close the books on 1956 and cut ties with the appeasement politics of Hungarian communism, today's government must learn to trust the public with the truth instead of buying their support.

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