Regimes of Memory in the Context of Autocratic Breakthroughs

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Global climate change, migration waves, Brexit, Trump's presidency, the politics of Putin's Russia, the narrow-minded technocratic executive leadership of the EU, and the constitutional crisis in Spain, present old, reborn, and new challenges to the integrative and cohesive forces of the diversity and openness of Europe. The current autocratic breakthroughs in Hungary and Poland are part of these phenomena. This introductory article focuses on the common preconditions of autocratic breakthroughs, especially on the uncertainties, anxieties and fears rooted in unprocessed traumatic experiences. They have created the possibility of pitting the case of the community against the case of liberty, producing powder-kegs of political hysteria in which the political language of national egotism and regimes of memory strongly connect with each other.

1. Questions

How is it possible that politicians entrusted with the representation of the public good, the political community, the nation, by the citizens should be able to use old and new forms of autocracy and dictatorship with cynical openness? How is it possible that freedom-loving populations such as the Slovaks, Hungarians and Poles put up with the creation of autocratic states by Mečiar, Fico, Orbán and Kaczinsky? How has such autocratic breakthrough become possible? What are its roots? How and why are a part of the Slovak, Hungarian and Polish people able to accept or at least tolerate the destruction of the checks and balances of a liberal democracy? How and why do they tolerate the annihilation of the rule of law? How and why was the autocratic plot able to transform independent institutions and parliament into subservient instruments of the personal power of an autocrat? Why and how are many people able to accept the identification of the interest of the whole political community with the private, selfish interests of the 'grandi ambiziosi'

kleptocrats? The answers to these questions are to be found in the uninhibited exploitation of earlier under-elaborated grievances, fears and traumas.

2. The 'Autocratic Breakthrough' and its Preconditions

When a liquid situation dominated by uncertainty and fear emerges, instead of the construction and consolidation of democratic legitimacy, enemy images will be in high demand:

> These nations went through historical situations where the collapse of the oppressive political and social powers of the past meant the catastrophe of the national community as a whole … rooted in situations where, for whatever reason, shock or misconception, the cause of the nation and the cause of liberty are pitted against each other, where a historical crash infuses the convulsive fear that the progress of liberty will jeopardize the cause of the nation. (Bibó 2015, 107–108)

All members of a divided community keep account of some kind of former offence, fear or humiliation. These have brought about efforts to ensure that a repetition of the offence can be excluded forever and also to enable the victim or her/his descendant to seek amends. In the former Communist countries, symbolic civil-war situations, victimhood and amends-seeking roles compete with each other. This is reflected in the sectarian vocabulary and magical rites of the political language of the anticolonial national liberation movements and in ever more absurd forms in the symbolic space and time of the divided political community, attempting to invest community spaces, times and the events they represent with new and often anachronistic meanings. Among other things, an astonishingly high number of people believe that they can and are free to choose whether Nazism or Communism brought greater suffering, danger and humiliation, and it is in this sense that they try to reinterpret or revise the major turning points in history.

3. Autocratic Political Language and Regime of Memory

Personal rule divides society into supporters and opponents by a variety of mechanisms and devices. These include a specific narrative, 'newspeak', and building a new privilege system in society based on a master–servant scheme, as well as creating new forms of power concentration (concentrating economic and information power and building an organization aristocracy). Following Montesquieu's typology of the forms of government, the republican principle of the virtue/common good, the aristocratic principle of moderation, and the monarchic principle of honour, are replaced by fear as the organizing principle of tyranny. (Montesquieu 1777, II. I-V, III. I-XI, available at https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/montesquieu-complete-works-vol-1-the-spirit-of-laws, accessed 28 November 2019).

The narrative of the 'newspeak', its political language and regime of memory are dominant parts of the system. Both are based on unelaborated historical traumas and

their long-term consequences, an alternative reality of political hysteria. The rightist political discourse, the language of national self-centeredness based on the decisive role of the political will to carry out the 'unavoidable' change of unjust relations, claims a nation-based state redistribution, new regime change, and moral revival. The underlying conviction is that the nation is not emulative, but self-sufficient, having its own values, its own past, and its own character, and that its historical merits entitle it to making others adjust to it instead of adjusting to others. Its interpretation of history, traceable to ethnic political language and interpretations, holds that foreign rule (various occupiers) replaced the ruling stratum, the intellectual elite, and the middle class of the nation. The vision of a distant glorious and a recent colonial past is paired with the devilish forms of an enemy image. The latter are typically based on a social Darwinist vision of a struggle for life between nations, cultures and races usually leading to and derived from conspiracy theories. The regime of memory contains a usable past strictly connected to the national egotist political language. In Hungary, the different forms of compensating for the small-nation inferiority complex, such as the imagined Hun and Turkish nomadic heritages, the idea of 'a thousand years of fighting for Europe, the bastion of Christianity', a very selective and indiscriminate hero–victim narrative and cult, the idealization of the interwar period autocracy, including the restitution of its kitschy monuments, and the political language of national self-centredness/national egotism, have all served to express disenchantment with the political language of 'adopting the European model' (Fülep 1934; Dénes 2012).

4. Political Hysteria

The starting point of political hysteria is the traumatic experience of a community. As a consequence, the community seeks one-hundred-percent guarantees for the historical shock never to occur again. This of course cripples the thinking of the community. Issues of the day that need to be solved, if somehow related to the trauma, increasingly become insurmountable. A false situation develops, in which the community does not face up to the crisis in which its political strategy and system has ended up. This in turn is covered up by a pseudo-solution, a formula to reconcile that which cannot be reconciled, or a compromise the community clings to obstinately. This necessarily brings about disorders of self-assessment. Hysteria is increasingly grafted onto the nation's identity, resulting in excesses of power and a sense of inferiority, a will to live off entitlements, the devaluation of genuine achievement, and a convulsive protection of the false reality. All this implies an urge for repetition, and after the satisfaction of revenge a further series of sought-for amends lead to a new disaster, a new shocking historical experience, a new trauma (Bibó 2015, 44–49, 104–118, 147–163).

5. Standard Measure

What is the standard measure by which we may judge political systems based on mobilized fear? What do we judge them by when we call the wielders of power to account for their deeds, for the politics they determine? The gauge is the meaning of European political development: a social organization determined by the humanization of power, the replacement of personal rule by impersonal service, the mitigation of suffering, pain, helplessness and fear – a society of mutual services. This implies the elimination of personal and impersonal domination, the bridling and countermanding of old and new power-concentrating tendencies, the division of power. It also requires constant effort and readiness, as liquid periods may occur that can lead to political hysteria owing to grievances, traumas and fears. This social organization rests on the anthropological insight that humans are the only living being that know that she/he will die, and the price for her/his intelligence is the fear of death independently of danger. If she/he manages to live with this fear and to tame it, she/he can break away from the vicious circle of tyranny. Then she/he will not want to keep others in fear, dread, subjection and helplessness so as to forget her/his own fear. Doing away with sub- and super-ordination, hierarchic social structures, misery and suffering is the measure of European political development. It is a standard and a possibility that has to be fought out from time to time through positive collective experiences, with the help of supportive patterns of evaluation and behaviour (Ferrero 1988, 30–38; Bibó 2015, 372–442).

6. Political Community

What connects human beings living in a given country when their life situations and backgrounds are widely different, when insurmountable barriers separate their world views, yet they do not want to live in a state of permanent civil war with each other? What turns them into a political community?

The answer is: a set of rules, procedural forms, patterns of socialization devised collectively which all must practise and abide by. The body politic acknowledges as the fundamental measures: equal human dignity, freedom and democracy, popular sovereignty as the source of power, the division of power, the constantly polished and revised set of checks and balances as an antidote to the excesses and concentration of power. A lawful state offers far larger room for the elaboration of traumas than a dictatorship that eliminates all independent public spaces. And this job is not restricted to Central and Eastern Europe alone (Kis 2013, 17–236; Kis 2019, 491–570).

Of course, in social terms, a personal perspective and the chances of individual progress, the promotion of human dignity, cooperation and performance as the decisive rules may mean the way out of a vicious circle. Amongst the preconditions is an array of positive patterns and the embeddedness of collective evaluation and behaviour that equal the dignity and autonomy of those who represent these patterns.

7. Conclusion and Introduction

When the wielders of power use and mobilize the grievances, fears and pains, hierarchic social stratifications and existential dependencies in order to maintain their own power, they do not promote the humanization of power. Nor does the liquidation of independent institutions, or the re-creation of master–servant relationships or the stifling of communal self-government. These are all signs of a beastly/mafia/predator state. All this can be compared to a person – illustrating Plato's definition of the tyrant – who cannot even control himself (Plato 1888, VIII. 566d–567c). Aristotle already realized that it is better to live under the rule of law than under the domination of humans (Aristotle 1885, III/VII–VIII, X, IV/X, V/X–XII).

Multidisciplinary case studies on Spain, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Ukraine, Cyprus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lithuania and Australia have been published during the last few decades (European Civil Wars, *European Review* **20**, 455–525; Regimes of Memory, *European Review* **21**, 465–593; Regimes of Memory II, *European Review* **24**, 479–567). Our new focus (Regimes of Memory III) sheds more light on the regimes of memory in Central and Southern Europe (Hungary, Poland, Germany and Spain) by way of five case studies. The first study reconstructs, analyses and interprets five different types of liberal nationalist political strategies and programmes of forging a collective identity in Hungary between the 1880s and 1910s. The second article analyses the social construction of historical trauma by the Polish intelligentsia. The third study looks at the generational discontinuities of the traumatic memory of Nazism and World War 2 after the German unification of 1989. The fourth article reinterprets and compares the judicial formalism in Central and Eastern Europe as a symptom of the inferiority complex of this area. The fifth study rethinks and re-evaluates the narrative framework of the history of Spanish Civil War. Together, these five studies continue our series of similar case studies of different parts of Europe and beyond.

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Iván Zoltán Dénes is a historian of ideas who over the last decade or so has concentrated on research on historical traumas and trauma management He is the author of 12 books (including eight monographs) and editor of 48 volumes. He served as researcher (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, 1973–1997), professor and chair (Debrecen University, 1997–2011), and was founding president of the István Bibó Center for Advanced Studies of the Humanities and Social Sciences (Budapest, 1996–2012). Currently he is the principal investigator of the Henrik Marczali Research Team, Budapest. He has been awarded visiting professorships and scholarships at, among others, the British Academy (London, Oxford, Cambridge), the Fulbright Commission (Stanford), IREX (Johns Hopkins, Harvard), the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (Wassenaar), and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His books in English include *The Art of Peacemaking. Political Essays by István Bibó* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2015); *Conservative Ideology in the Making* (Budapest; New York: CEU Press, 2009); *Liberty and the Search for Identity. Liberal Nationalisms and the Legacy of Empires* (Budapest; New York: CEU Press, 2006). He is a member of the Academia Europaea (1995–). A full list of publications can be found at http://www.mtmt2.hu.