

## POLITICAL EXTREMISM AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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### **Extremists are among us**

*A specter is haunting Central Europe--the specter of extremism. Will extreme nationalists soon take power in some European capitals?--so asks Dawid Warszawski.*

How to cope with them? In Romania, the Romania Mare party received 23 percent of votes and its leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor missed becoming President by a small margin.

Yes, this is the same Tudor who announced that he would lock up Gypsies in camps and would rule with an automatic gun in hand.

Istvan Csurka's Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIEP), which sees Zionist-Masonic treachery everywhere and speaks of the return of Vojvodina and Transylvania, may become a coalition partner with the governing FIDESZ, which is threatened with defeat in the coming elections.

At the same time the Hungarian parliament has introduced an unfortunate law governing the status of Hungarians living abroad, which has become the topic of the day in neighboring countries. In Slovakia, members of Parliament referred to [Hungarians] as conquerors from the East, arriving in Europe on their "ugly horses" to rape women--as if this had happened only yesterday. And Bratislava, by the way, may be awaiting the return to power of Vladimir Meciar, whose populist and authoritarian rule a few years ago blocked Slovakia from entering NATO.

In Serbia, at least until recently, almost all political movements were extremist--ranging from the socialists who were then in power (and whose leader, Slobodan Milosevic, was still leading the party from his cell in The Hague), to the fascistic radicals led by Vojislav Seselj, and the Party of Serbian Unity created by the war criminal Arkan. It was the moderate center that was at the political margin.

Add to this group our own League of Polish Families and its supporters, as well as the Czech communists (although they are out of power), the still strong and unrepentant Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the nationalists who still rule in Bosnia, and the smaller factions in Macedonia, Albania, and Bulgaria, and it is clear that the panorama of Central European extremism is broad as well as dangerous.

### **Expanding the margins**

It's true that one shouldn't put all these parties in the same box. There are substantial

differences between the state-supported policies of extermination preached by Milosevic and his people, the promise of similar policies suggested by Tudor, and the political diatribes of a supposedly reformed Meciar. Despite their differences, however, these groups are more alike than not.

Common to all these movements is a vision of the state controlled by the dominant ethnic group, a dislike of civic society, a conviction that their own religious faith should be the cornerstone of self-identify, and hostility toward Jewish or Gypsy "outsiders." These movements are especially dangerous because they deeply distrust neighbors, who are supposedly longing to seize pieces of the homeland, and because of their desire to return to lands they see as having been unjustly usurped by these same neighbors. This collection of attitudes leads logically to their deep skepticism about democracy, which they see as harming them because it gives rights to outsiders and brings in European integration based on principles of citizenship rather than of ethnicity. The followers of these movements dream of a Europe of independent nationalisms, not one of citizens abiding by a shared law. It is like a caricature of De Gaulle's vision instead of the timidly cosmopolitan dreams of Schuman.

Given these circumstances, what can be done? As we watch, the expression "Central European extremisms" is becoming redundant. They are not just Central European, if one considers the post-fascist and Freedom parties which are part of governments in Austria and Italy, not to mention Le Pen, eternally haunting France. Nor can these movements be rightly called extremist, since they have significant popular support, often more than the democratic parties that keep losing elections. But they cannot be ignored: they may be in power in a number of European capitals, and soon.

The goals and values of these groups are clearly spelled out by the growing nationalist media. In Poland alone the combined circulation of [the nationalist press] is estimated at 750,000, and the number of Radio Maryja's listeners at 3.5 to 5 million. Their influence is even broader—more and more often they shape public debate as well as the programs of other parties (which are not necessarily extremist but simply sensitive to the voices of the voters). It is they (or their post-communist opponents) who will form the political reality of our part of the continent in the next few years. In metaphorical terms, we have a choice between the descendants of the builders of the Berlin wall and those who would build a wall around the Gypsy neighborhood in Usti nad Labem. The former wanted to separate themselves from the West, the latter from their Gypsy neighbors.

### **On the beautiful, blue Danube**

This prospect is disquieting not just to Central Europeans. The Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) in New Jersey is one of many groups addressing concerns over ethnic relations in Central Europe. Unlike academic institutions or human rights organizations, however, PER does not focus on scholarship or human rights abuses. It is an American institution with an international reach (its Council for Ethnic Accord includes, among others, Bronislaw Geremek) that is trying to assist in finding pragmatic solutions and to prevent the escalation of conflicts. The organization's aim for many years has been to bring together ethnic groups that are in conflict, and their political representatives. These efforts have met with varied results. In Romania, PER helped to work out a *modus vivendi* among the political parties representing Romanians and Hungarians. It also has contributed to the improvement of political representation for the Roma. In Slovakia, PER helped to create the Slovak-Hungarian political coalition, which in 1998

effectively displaced Meciar from power. In Yugoslavia, the Serb-Albanian dialogue organized by PER did not prevent the conflict, nor could it have. But the dialogue was resurrected under PER's auspices when the war ended. And the list goes on.

These activities sometimes invite criticism. Like similar organizations, such as the Soros Foundation, PER is attacked for meddling in the internal affairs of other countries, or accused of promoting American foreign policy goals. But these criticisms miss the point. PER does not seek to impose particular solutions, its own or anyone else's. Its only aim is to facilitate solutions, or to create a mutual understanding between the sides. To accomplish this, PER uses the experience it has gained over the years.

The trust that it has earned through the years means that PER meetings are attended by high-ranking active politicians, experts, and political observers. The Budapest seminar, held in mid-February and devoted to a discussion of extremism, was attended by a Serbian deputy prime minister, an adviser to the Yugoslav president, and politicians representing the ruling coalitions and the opposition. Among those present were heads of parliamentary commissions and ministers from Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, as well as the president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The U.S. and German ambassadors to Hungary, along with politicians and analysts from Hungary, Germany, Austria, and Poland completed the group. Representatives of the extremist movements were not invited, and while this may have limited the learning value of the debate, at the same time it made it possible to carry out the discussions in a more peaceful manner.

PER meetings are closed to the media, and its participants may not identify the source of any specific remarks made at the discussions. This helps to guarantee a certain level of openness and frankness that could not be achieved otherwise. But, even without quoting who said what, it is possible to summarize the discussions.

### **The sorcerer's apprentices**

It is most striking that none of the participants thought the issue was an artificial one (and only a few stated that while it might be serious, this relates only to the neighbors, not "us"). To the contrary, they had no difficulty in identifying extremist movements in their own countries--although one Slovak who said that he hated the HZDS (the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, led by Meciar) from the bottom of his heart described it as populist rather than extremist (perhaps out of consideration for a HZDS parliamentarian who was also a participant at the meeting). At the same time everyone took note of the deepening international cooperation of extremists: Le Pen invited Tudor, Polish nationalists invited Gianfranco Fini, and Serbian and Romanian Eastern Orthodox extremists are in frequent contact with extremists connected with the Moscow patriarchate, under the banner of what one Romanian participant called "orthodox fascism." In the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, parties that are boycotted by all parliamentary groupings, such as Tudor's Romania Mare, or Zhirinovsky's liberal democrats, have created their own informal grouping and are coordinating their activities. This cooperation of nationalists, who are in principle hostile to everything foreign, only seemingly is a contradiction. It harkens back to the situation in Poland a few years ago when a group of skinheads in the Opole district, who proclaimed hatred of everything not Polish (especially Germans), were cooperating with a German neo-Nazi group. Both, however, turned out to be in full agreement: the Polish skinheads didn't want Germans in Poland, and their German partners didn't want Poles

in Germany.

Although the meeting took place in Budapest and many Hungarian politicians participated, they were very cautious in discussing local extremist movements. It must be acknowledged that they were in a very difficult situation. In the upcoming elections, conservative FIDESZ may be facing defeat by the socialists, and their only lifeboat could be an alliance with the ultra-nationalist MIEP in second-round elections. And though some FIDESZ politicians have emphatically denied such a possibility, others, in particular Prime Minister Viktor Orban, are silent on the subject. No wonder, then, that one of the Hungarian socialists at the conference requested that "mainstream democratic parties" categorically exclude the possibility of cooperation with extremist movements. This idea found understanding only among the participants from Slovakia, Serbia, Romania and Poland.

Meanwhile, it is evident that MIEP has already succeeded in forcing its style on others. During a debate over the advantages and disadvantages of outside influences as means to condemn extremism, one of the Hungarian participants associated with the ruling party spoke with biting sarcasm about the storm of criticism from the West in response to the statement made by the Hungarian prime minister a few months ago that, if Hungarian Roma are to be integrated into society, they would have to start going to work and sending their children to school. When other participants pointed out that discrimination and racism, not laziness or lack of education, are the main obstacles to the implementation of this common sense plan and that the criticism of Orban stemmed from his failure to mention these factors, the Hungarian participant responded only that he was sure that this subject was of deep concern to his prime minister.

There is no doubt that Hungarian conservative parties [FIDESZ and its allies] are at least as eager to get the support of people who vote for MIEP. Such statements, along with foreign criticism of Orban, help to achieve this goal and allow Orban to present himself as a defender of Hungary. His statement, after the conference in Budapest, that the Czech Republic should renounce the Benes decrees (which were aimed not only at Czech Germans but also Hungarians) once again confirmed the strongly nationalistic sentiments of this politician.

The last "i" was dotted by an Austrian participant, who, after responding to vocal criticisms about the rise of Joerg Haider, enthusiastically recommended that mainstream parties co-opt the issues raised by extremist movements--fear of immigrants, intolerance of foreigners, and the defense of threatened national identity. The mainstream parties, he argued, should aim to show voters that they are not afraid to tackle these problems, and thus to undermine the arguments of the extremists.

One of the Romanian politicians was of a similar opinion. He said that his party, in response to the threat by Tudor, created its own Tudor, who addressed the concerns of conservative voters in a similar way. This strategy drew some voters away from the leader of the Romania Mare. "Our own Tudor was so successful," he finished happily, "that I would be afraid of him if he weren't on our side"--unaware that this strategy has created two Tudors instead of one.

Slovaks, on the other hand, spoke with pride about a recent declaration by their parliament proclaiming that, after Slovakia joins the European Union, its own laws concerning abortion, euthanasia, and gay marriage will still take precedence over EU

laws. Representatives of three [Slovak] parties [participating in the Budapest meeting], each with a different political orientation, all claimed that this declaration, and the debate that preceded it, would help to deflate the arguments of anti-EU extremists.

These particular issues, however, are not addressed by EU laws, which leave such questions to the individual member nations. Abortion is still illegal in Ireland, euthanasia is legal in Holland only, and gay marriages are possible only in a few EU countries. The declaration of the Slovak Parliament knocks on doors that are already open, and gives the impression that there is something to fear from the EU. It would be just as logical to pass a declaration that Hungarians, or Roma, or Jews should be loyal citizens of Slovakia. Of course they should be, but making such a declaration would suggest that perhaps they are not. Extremists, instead of losing the argument, would get its glowing confirmation.

### **The grammar of totalitarianism**

The strategy of a sorcerer's apprentice is always very risky. It is true that the problems that extremists raise are very real and that liberal democracy doesn't deal with them very well. The logical outcome of the liberal position is its acquiescence in the eventual transition of national into multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies. This can work in immigrant nations such as the US, but it is unacceptable to most Europeans. As a result, the mainstream parties are forced to navigate between their declared values and the need to address the concerns of voters, for example in opting to restrict immigration or limit autonomy for ethnic minorities. Thus they are exposed to attacks by the extremists who say that, if multi-cultural is good, why limit it? And if it is not good, then why allow it?

These facts allow us to understand why Central European extremism today is so strongly influenced by nationalism, even though there is also a history of anti-nationalist extremism [that is, communist internationalism]. But its latter, leftist manifestation is in obvious decline, even though there are still some organizations that hold to it. Nevertheless, in our part of the continent, communism has totally compromised this type of [internationalist] extremism. Its remnants (with the exception of the Czech Republic and Hungary) are incorporated in the larger post-communist parties rather than in their original form.

For some voters, the recollection of communist rule is reason enough to support right-wing extremists. Their victory is seen as a guarantee that there will be no return to the communist past. But there are two additional elements of the communist legacy that work in favor of right-wing extremism--the general rehabilitation of nationalism, resulting from the reaction to communist governments and their defeat, and a structure of political discussion inherited from the days of communism.

To recall a metaphor I had already used before, if one desires to translate the language of communism into the language of democracy, one has to change both the vocabulary and the grammar. But in translating from the language of communism into the language of nationalism, all one needs to change is the vocabulary; the grammar remains unchanged. In this case, unity (national now, no longer "political and moral") remains the ultimate value in the struggle unto victory against the enemy who, though he is now a national instead of a class one, hasn't lost any of his cunning or ugliness. The language of democracy, on the other hand, does not talk about victory over the enemy,

but instead about the compromise among various legitimate interests. It is skeptical both of sameness and of multi-ethnicity, recognizing that there are no victors, and more important, no enemies. It doesn't have a hope in this contest.

### **Anti-Semitism lives**

A common trait of the language of nationalism – as many participants in the debate remarked – is that it also expresses anti-Semitism. It has even raised its ugly head in Serbia, which has been historically free of anti-Semitism. It flourishes in Poland, Slovakia and Romania, where Jewish communities are small (although such a statement may be risky because--despite the good intentions of those who make it--it implies that there is a numerical threshold at which anti-Semitism becomes somehow understandable). This points, however, to the gargantuan disproportion between the actual role played by Jews in these countries and the importance given to anti-Semitism in the programs of extremist movements (and in the philo-Semitic response).

Only in Hungary is there a substantial Jewish community. Its members support the range of democratic parties, so that in this particular case the anti-Semitism of the extremists could have some justification. More dangerous, however, is the racism directed against Roma, the outcome of which can be counted not only in the large number of hate statements, but in the growing number of victims attacked by racists.

Worse, they take place in a climate of societal indifference. A Slovak participant cited a survey conducted by a magazine following one of the numerous murders of Roma in Slovakia. Those interviewed, all luminaries, expressed the belief that discrimination against Roma does not exist.

### **Dull democracy**

Participants in the meeting in Budapest stated, with some despair, that democracy appears dry and dull when it faces the emotions aroused by extremists. Democracy does not address extremism, and often is simply helpless.

A few participants suggested that, while not prohibiting the political activities of extremists (which no one proposed) it might at least be possible to limit their capability to spread hate propaganda through the extremist-controlled media. This idea met with a strong protest from one participant, an active journalist, who defended freedom of speech. In response, one of the politicians recalled an exchange of arguments heard by the German court in the 1920s. An accused Nazi activist loudly protested a perceived limit on his right to defend himself. The judge asked how he reconciled his defense, based on the rule of law, with his attacks on it. "I'm requesting my right to a defense in the name of the values you believe in," he answered. "When we come to power, then I will take this right away in the name of the values I believe in."

It was difficult to avoid analogies between the striking clarity of this statement and the defense speech in The Hague made by Slobodan Milosevic, the bloodiest of all Central European extremists, who spoke the same day as the PER seminar.

It seems that democracies threatened by extremism don't really know how to defend themselves. Outside pressure is needed, the participants agreed, at least so that the victims of extremism do not feel isolated. But outside pressures tend to be counter-

productive. Istvan Csurka, asked whether he was concerned about the possible reaction in Europe if he were to come to power, similar to that against Austria, calmly responded, "What happened to Austria?" And in fact, when emotions calmed, it turned out that European sanctions succeeded only in the removal of Haider from politics on a national level. His party is still in power, and its coalition partner, the People's Party, a democratic party, has incorporated his style and program.

And yet the possibility of preventing extremism exists. It is important to start early. PER president Allen Kassof reported on the results of a seminar organized not long ago by PER for representatives of mainstream and ethnic Albanian parties in Ulcinj in Montenegro, near the Albanian border. Albanians initially made a number of constitutional demands. They demanded the creation of a second chamber in parliament that would represent minorities, and veto power in matters that concern them. The same kind of demands from Albanians in neighboring Macedonia almost killed the peace process there last year. Taken seriously, such demands would have resulted in a similar fiasco in Ulcinj. Kassof proposed, however, that the Albanians make more practical demands that could be implemented without constitutional reform. The Albanians agreed and the next day presented a new list of six demands. These included the building of a maternity hospital in Ulcinj, a city . . . where many Albanians live . . . . They also proposed opening in that town a border crossing with Albania, and at the university in Podgorica a department where teachers would be educated in Albanian, with the goal of teaching in ethnic Albanian schools, as well as the acceptance by this university of diplomas from Albanian universities in Pristina, Tirana, and Tetovo. After some thoughtful review, representatives of the opposition and the governing coalition found these demands quite workable . . . . A potential crisis, which would have resulted in the unavoidable fueling of political extremism on both sides, was averted.

The real problem is that young democracies don't seem especially adept at recognizing potential crisis situations at an early stage, although that is exactly what democracy should be able to do well. The ultimate responsibility for the development of extremism falls on the system from which it arises. It is true that it is often impossible to convince people who have decided to abandon democratic values that they are wrong. It is much harder, however, to convince those, who--rightly or wrongly--feel that the democratic system has abandoned them. Because they feel abandoned, they place their hopes with the extremists.