

Hungarians look to future, not past

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The strong showing of the Socialist Party in the Hungarian elections on Sunday may trouble those Americans who have been following recent electoral trends in east-central Europe. Coupled with the former communists' win in the 1993 Polish elections, the report from Hungary may seem like bad news indeed. To many readers, it warns of a return to socialism, if not Leninist-style communism in countries thought to have kicked the habit.

The first wave of elections in 1989-1990 went as Americans expected. Citizens in the former Soviet-bloc nations voted overwhelmingly against communist candidates and for candidates backed by popular movements. Once allowed to vote in free elections, these citizens massively rejected a system that had been thoroughly discredited for its economic and moral failures.

Why then, in the "second wave" of elections, should the same voters in these countries turn to parties and candidates with links to the old system?

A good reason for voters' rejection of the post-communist governments in Hungary and Poland is their countries' poor economic performance. Gallup polls show that a plurality of voters in both nations

believe that "things were better" than "now." This belief has been particularly strong in Hungary, where citizens in 1990 had high expectations for democracy and a free market and now look longingly at the past.

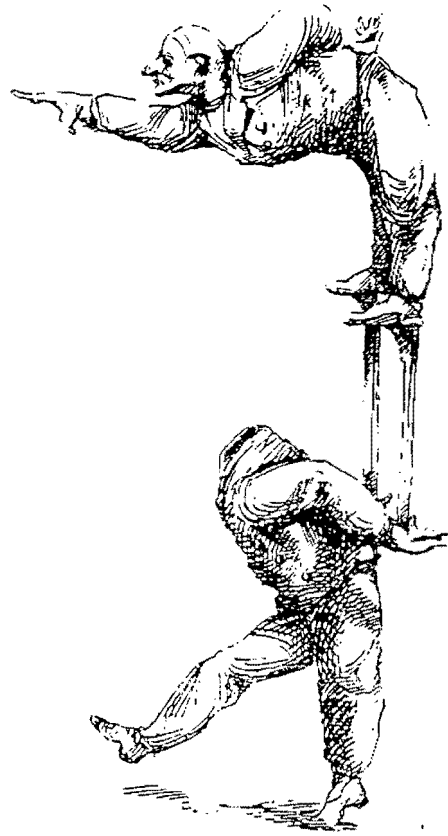
The current center-right coalition government is led by the nationalistic Democratic Forum, which has focused on the Hungarian equivalent of family values and on the rights of Hungarian minorities in other countries while presiding over a disastrous agricultural policy, high-level corruption in the country's privatization system and heavy-handed control of the broadcast media.

As a result, the Democratic Forum plummeted in polls of party popularity from first to fourth place over four years. We can understand why voters want to punish the government in charge, but why should voters avoid the other parties and vote for the former communists? At least in Hungary, the explanation centers on who the socialists are and what they represent.

What is the relationship of the socialists to the former ruling party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party? The Hungarian Socialist Party was founded in October 1989, prior to the collapse of state socialism. While the Socialist Party accepted designation as the legal successor to the former ruling party (to claim party property and to facilitate the power transition), it also declared a complete disbanding of the former party and required members to apply anew to the new party. For the most part, those who joined it were reform socialists in the old Workers' Party who pushed it to become the most "liberal" of the ruling parties in east central Europe.

For example, the current head of the Hungarian Socialist Party, Gyula Horn, was foreign minister when Hungary opened its borders to Austria in September 1989. This allowed thousands of East Germans to escape to the West, and it was a precipitating event in the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The distinction between the Socialist Party and the old Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party was sharpened by the subsequent emergence of a reborn Workers' Party that claimed the ideological mantle of the old ruling party. The Socialist Party eagerly gave up that heavy garment, and in August 1993 adopted the economic austerity program proposed by Laszlo Bekesi, the former minister of finance.



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Bekesi's program put the party on record as favoring accelerated privatization and a larger role for foreign investment. As a result, the Socialist's economic program is quite similar to that of the Free Democrats, a liberal party that has agreed to enter a governing coalition with the Socialist Party. Bekesi's role in formulating the party's economic policy reveals some pluralism in thinking among the top party leaders. party is not simply Horn's show.

Finally, the character of the Socialists comes through most clearly in opinion polls, which reveal that the party is not particularly attractive to workers who see benefits in maintaining state subsidies to inefficient industries, but that it is favored by university graduates and those with professional occupations.

Without doubt, some of the Socialist Party's appeal in this election owes to nostalgia for life under Hungary's old policy of "goulash communism," when most voters judged "things were better" than they are now.

Perhaps voters also anticipate a higher level of competence in politics from those who had experience running a country before. But these Socialists are not campaigning as successors to the old Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the voters surely don't see it as offering a return to communism, and Americans should not view their victory as a step toward old-style socialism any more than they would an election victory by a social democratic party in a Western European nation.

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