

# Can Attila take Victor down? - the illiberal Hungarian democracy might be weaker than you think

*By Gustaf Antell (Finland)*

**The illiberal government in Hungary can't survive without some liberal opposition as a punching bag, but having opposition is also risky. The government has been successful in containing the liberal media in Budapest, but a surprising force for truth is rising in the South.**

- The government has to have an enemy. The government's constant power play comes from this desire to create an enemy, says professor Tim Crane at the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest. This is a very important part of their strategy to remain popular.

Crane is a British professor of philosophy most famous for his work about the human mind. He is also a liberal "in the English way".

Crane and the CEU represent one of these enemies that the government needs, namely liberal academia.

## **The Attack**

The Hungarian government has threatened to close the CEU with a new law demanding that foreign-owned universities (CEU is formally an American university) need to have a campus in its home country. Thus far, CEU has had its main campus in Budapest.

Simultaneously, there has been a hugely visible government-sponsored campaign against the founder of the CEU, George Soros.

Soros is the perfect crook for the government's illiberal democracy. He is rich, American, progressive and, which is important, born in Hungary. He is proof that even Hungarian-born people can be contaminated by values that threaten both Hungarian national interests and age-old traditions.

From the Hungarian government's point of view, American universities and academics should all be seen as dangerously progressive, ie liberal enemies of the illiberal democracy that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán says he has established.

This, of course, is a conscious misrepresentation of academia. According to the government, Western liberals are always pushing their opinions and forcing people to be "politically correct".

- It would be wrong to say that there aren't dominant views at the universities about political and social questions, but nobody is forcing anyone to have these views, says Crane.

According to Crane, it's rather the opposite. He thinks that what the Hungarian government is doing is actively interfering in people's lives. The government rewards its friends and punishes its enemies.

Thus it's actually not conservative, at least not from a Western perspective.

- The Fidesz government is not a conservative government in the British sense. British conservatives - at their best - attempt to conserve things. They tend to conserve institutions and

have a high degree of tolerance to people's behaviour. According to them, the state should not interfere.

The Hungarian government lacks this kind of conservative tolerance. The state is constantly working against those who have opposing ideas.

Taking control over the media is the most apparent example of this. The second Orbán government had only been in power for half a year when it introduced the new Press and Media Act of November 2010, which in practice was a government take-over of public broadcasting.

- The government does not believe in conserving even the short traditions and institutions that have been built up since transition after 1989 and 1990, says Crane.

Thus, according to Crane, the distinction between conservative and liberal is actually not a good description of what is really happening in Hungary today.

The reason why the Viktor Orbán-lead Fidesz-party has chosen to call itself conservative might then be more strategic than ideological. It is a means to an end, pure populism.

Fidesz started out as a liberal party, but changed to calling itself national conservative under Orbán's leadership in the mid-1990s.

### **Viktor kills free media - but Attila is reborn**

Seven years after the introduction of the Press and Media Act, most of the media is under the government's control. In Budapest there are some media - mostly online - that are actively scrutinizing the government and elites linked to it, but they are struggling to reach large audiences.

They are particularly unable to reach the people who vote for Fidesz.

On the countryside, government-friendly businessmen have bought virtually all news outlets both on a regional and a local level.

Except that, since spring 2017, there is a new online paper in the town of Pécs. It is small, but highly significant.

The regional online newspaper *Szabad Pécs* (*Free Pécs* in English) has become something of a journalistic phenomenon in Hungary. Attila Babos, the editor-in-chief and founder of *Szabad Pécs*, is every liberal journalist's favourite colleague.

Why? What makes one small publication in Pécs, with a staff of three part-time journalists, a potential threat against the illiberal state?

It's not like Babos set out to fight the government per se, he tells me when I meet him in Pécs.

- I was just as hard on the last government, always complaining to my bosses that they were too soft.

The reason he established *Szabad Pécs* was that the newspaper he used to work for was going to be sold to businessmen close to the government.

- These businessmen didn't want us to cover local events objectively anymore. They wanted us to stop writing anything negative, says Babos.

Except of course negative stories about George Soros, Western liberals and muslim immigrants.

But when it comes to local government, Babos knew he would not be able to do his duty as a journalist properly anymore. That is why he quit and started with *Szabad Pécs*.

It only took the local government in Pécs a few weeks before they realised that they had a threat in Babos' integrity.

*Szabad Pécs* ran a story about the city of Pécs' empty coffers and unpaid bills. Obviously, this story would never had been published in government-friendly media.

After that, the local government refuses to invite *Szabad Pécs* to press conferences and formal events.

But *Szabad Pécs* doesn't lack sources. Sometimes the local government is just as full of leaks as the Trump White House.

- We get a lot of information from sources that wish to remain anonymous, says Babos.

And so, not even a year after it was established, *Szabad Pécs* has become the darling of the otherwise wounded liberal media establishment.

### **Potential threat - how?**

*Szabad Pécs* is small, but the word that there is a new and brave local online newspaper in southern Hungary has already been noticed within some circles in Brussels.

In Washington, the State Department is already promising to start promoting small rural news publications later in 2018.

If this small three-man-team can be the start of a new media awakening and renew confidence within opposition media, it's good for the Hungarian democracy. But it's not enough.

The real threat that a new and critical newspaper outside the capital poses is more directly connected to the essence of what an illiberal state really is - inward-looking, nostalgic yet intrusive, and stagnant.

In Budapest I meet János Széky, Foreign Policy Editor at *Élet és Irodalom*, a weekly magazine about literature and politics.

- The problem with Fidesz and Hungary today is that it doesn't create anything, says Széky. The last thing we created and we still are supposed to be proud of is the Rubik's Cube. That was invented in the 70s.

For the government-controlled media, this stagnation of the creative mind makes being relevant close to impossible. How do you write inspirational stories praising the government when it really isn't doing much?

Sure, there is the common enemy - but at some point people loose interest in reading only about the threats of liberals and immigration.

We're not there yet, but for every day that Western Europe isn't imploding or exploding, those stories start to feel old compared to the inevitably stagnating society and the Hungarian economy.

What *Szabad Pécs* does is putting a finger on this weakness. Critical, investigative journalism is creating a buzz. People are starting to talk politics in Pécs again.

**It ain't over till it's over - liberals have to do it right**

But is it really this easy to push authoritarianism to self-destruct?

Naturally not.

Even if people lose faith in their populist leaders, it won't make them move left on the progressive value board.

Liberalism is not the normal state of mind many liberals seem to think it is.

According to professor Crane of CEU, liberals have to learn to talk politics with the kind of conservatives that support the Orbán government.

- Liberals tend to look at politics in terms of abstract principles, like justice or equality. But equality is a very difficult idea to actually make precise. We all believe that all people are equal, but what does that mean in real political terms?

Thus liberals tend to totally ignore things that conservatives and other non-liberals think are important, like threats to the country or dangers that people feel from outsiders.

- Liberals tend to moralize about these questions and accuse conservatives of being unjust against other groups, says Crane. They start to talk about increasing equality and saying that we need to decrease inequality between "us" and "them".

What does that really mean? For conservatives, this might sound like principles are more important than the safety of my own family.

This line of thinking echoes what the Northern Ireland liberal politician John Alderdice has said.

- A child will shout "This is unfair!" when they feel something is wrong, they don't say "This is unjust". What's fair is a natural feeling we all understand, what is just is not.

If people feel that migration, for example, is making them feel less secure, the issue has to be addressed.

- We must accept that we have to be more flexible on principles. Sometimes they do collide with reality.

*So when Hungarian villagers are afraid of five men they perceive as Muslims walking down the street, we have to take their feelings into account?*

- I don't think you can persuade people by engaging them in the theoretical discourse about equality, says Crane. Liberals have to get the facts across, not moralize. Calling the other part out for not respecting human rights doesn't help.

The government's anti-Soros campaign, including the claims that Western elites are bringing Muslim immigrants to Europe to destroy Christianity, is a good example of this.

- The campaign is based on deliberate misrepresentation of immigration in Hungary and in Europe generally. The government is misrepresenting the facts.

You fight false "facts" with real facts.

**Attila keeps to the facts - and that's it**

And so we're back to the role of Attila Babos and *Szabad Pécs*. When a growing number of voters for the illiberal government start to lose interest in the news that the government-friendly media is producing, there is a vacuum of information.

Restoring people's trust in good national journalism will be difficult, but a publication working with local news on a close-to-you level can earn the trust of new readers faster. The stories are easier to verify when you have seen the people you're reading about in real life.

Their stories are also concrete, the people featured in the stories feel more real and the pictures are taken in a well-known place - sometimes just around the corner.

*Szabad Pécs* talks about things that matter in the reader's everyday life.

What local journalism can prove much easier than national and international journalism can, is that their stories are true.

Readers in Pécs can compare what they read in the government controlled local media with what *Szabad Pécs* is writing.

Naturally, this does not necessarily lead to a grand realisation about which media is better, but by time, opinions do change.

Attila Babos did not set out to reform all of Hungarian media, but now he says that he has got a lot of questions about building up a network of local or regional online newspapers around the country.

### **The Emperor still has some clothes**

In the end, Viktor Orbán's illiberal state is a Hungarian version of an attempt to build up a new elite for generations to come. He's the wanna-be Putinesque feudal lord handing out knighthoods and noble titles to those he feels deserve them.

Authoritarianism feeds on corruption and nepotism.

In Pécs, Attila Babos is doing a good job in showing that the local feudal lords have no clothes. If there will soon be a network of Attilas around Hungary, there will be a lot of lords stripped naked.

Will this hurt Orbán? Too early to say.

*More Democracy for More Europe - project supported by EU - Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency*



With the support of the Europe  
for Citizens programme of the  
European Union