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## “The Stolen Transition” - Conspiracy Theories in Post-Communist and Post-Democratic Hungary

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### Abstract

Similar to Poland, Hungary also experienced a peaceful transition from communism to democracy and market economy. The Hungarian Round Table Talks were organized in 1989, following the successful Polish model. While the Round Table Talks were similarly crucial in Hungary and in Poland in paving the way for institutional and political changes, and concluded in a very successful manner for the opposition parties, conspiracy theories similar to those seen in Poland (see Soral and Kofta in this issue) are proliferating in Hungary as well. The article argues that the rejection of the “compromises” around the transition is due to the very nature of populism: it likes black-and-white, Manichean logic. This article briefly introduces the process of the Round Table Talks and summarizes the literature’s findings on the general social psychological impacts of the transitions. Transitions always provide fertile ground for conspiracy theorizing as they are unexpected even with widespread consequences that fall beyond the control of most members of a society. But in Hungary, these conspiracy theories have been politically exploited in order to fuel discontent towards the democratic institutions - and in this way, they were instrumental in the “second transition”, the illiberal de-democratization after 2010.

### Keywords

transition, transformation, conspiracy theory, populism, illiberal



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"You should have done a revolution!" It was a legendary sentence of the first Prime Minister of Hungary, József Antall, when he was asked in an interview about why the Hungarian transition was smooth, not fulfilling the expectations of many that it would lead to a total disappearance of the communist elite from public life.

His statement also reveals that the process of transition, and the Round Table Talks that preceded them, are perceived in a highly similar manner in Hungary as in Poland, according to what Janusz Reykowski (2020, this issue) and Janusz Grzelak (2020, this issue) described in their papers. The similarities are not accidental. Both countries experienced peaceful transitions, and Round Table Talks were essential in both cases to pave the way for social-political changes. At the same time, in both countries, the compromises that made this peaceful change possible are perceived to be more as a betrayal than a heroic act – especially by the populist right.

Janusz Reykowski highlighted two important reasons for the general criticism of the Round Table Talks in Poland: the general disappointment with the results it could bring about, and that they serve as weapons for political battles. This characterization also fits perfectly for Hungary. Disillusionment from the transition and its economic and political achievements became one of the most important drivers of political change in Hungary.

Before going into detail, two disclaimers are necessary regarding this paper. First, this study will focus mainly on the perception of the transition process and will introduce the historical events only to the extent that they are needed to understand the social-psychological trends and tendencies. Historians have summarized the Hungarian transition process well (see, e.g., Romsics, 2007), and this paper, written by a social psychologist and political scientist, does not have the ambition to provide an in-depth introduction of these historic events. Second, my focus is even more narrow than the general perception of the transition process. In this paper, similar to the paper of Mirosław Kofta and Wiktor Soral in this special issue, I am focusing on the conspiracy theories in Hungary that are surrounding the transition in general and the Round Table Talks in particular, and only highlighting the general social-psychological context to the extent that it explains the abundant conspiracy theorizing we perceive in post-transitional Hungary.

The structure of this paper will be the following. After a short summary of how the Round Table Talks were conducted in Hungary, and what the social climate in the country was at that time, I will introduce the main conspiracy theories that surrounded the transition process. Based on the similarities between these theories in Poland and Hungary, I try to identify the features of transitions that make them a perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theorizing. In the end, I draw some conclusions about the mixed legacy of the Round Table Talks.

## Hungarian Round Table Talks in 1989: Following the Polish Model

Since the transition, there has been a general perception in Hungary that political events often repeat the Polish ones. A commonplace phrase has been popularized to describe this phenomenon: “*The fast train from Warsaw arrived*” in Budapest. And while the similarities between Hungarian and Polish politics are often exaggerated, we can find valid examples that Polish and Hungarian politics influence each other (see, e.g., Horváth, 2010). In the transition process, we can find important similarities – but notable differences as well.

What is certain: the “Warsaw train” really did arrive in Budapest in 1989, with only a few months delay. And the timing was not the only similarity: the Polish model served as a primary inspiration for the Round Table talks in Hungary. These talks took place in the spring and autumn of 1989.

At the same time, the setting of the talks was different. There were two settings of the Round Table Talks: the Opposition Round Tables and the National Round Tables. The Opposition Round Tables were aimed to coordinate the position of the opposition forces for the national Round Table and to try to break the “divide and rule” strategy of the communist state party MSZMP. They did it with limited success, as the communist party tried, and was able to capitalize on the fragmentation and proliferation of the opposition parties at that time. The talks between the opposition players were initiated and coordinated by the Independent Lawyers’ Forum.

The National Round Table, contrary to the Polish case, had a trilateral structure. Beside the Government and the Opposition side, there was a third pole of unions and “civil society organizations” - largely fake, satellite, pet organizations of the communist party. Both the Opposition Round Tables and the National Round Tables were highly secretive – for the sake of success. Obviously, this factor also played into the hands of the conspiracy theorists - especially those who were not at the negotiating table.

Also, the very nature of the Hungarian opposition movement was different in Hungary than in Poland: there was no mass mobilization movement like in Poland (Solidarity), and the opposition mainly consisted of “top-down”, elite opposition groups, without a robust grass-roots organizational structure and mass mobilizing potential (Bartlett, 1997). Also, there were only a few mass protests, so while the Communist Party felt some pressure from the public, this pressure was much weaker than in Poland.

Despite all the difficulties mentioned above, and some pauses in the negotiations (especially over the elections and the selection method of the president), the Round Tables can be regarded as rather successful for the opposition groups as most of their demands were finally incorporated in the agreements and paved the way for a peaceful, constitutional transition. The result was six draft laws that helped to create a multiparty system, free and fair parliamentary elections, and a new penal code. While essential differences and rifts remained over some issues, even on the opposition side (e.g., the

presidency), the Round Table Talks were significant landmarks in the transition to democracy.

## The Subjective Experiences With the Transition

While the Round Table Talks paved the way for the quick and profound institutional changes towards liberal democracy, social-psychological preconditions were somewhat lacking. The transition left Hungarian society unprepared. Empirical research painted a dramatic picture of how society reacted to this political cataclysm. Based on this research, I consider the following five points most important in shaping the political tendencies in post-transitional Hungary.

First, nobody expected the transition; it happened rather quickly and unexpectedly. In 1988, just one year before the Round Table Talks began, less than 10 percent of the population expected a regime change in the next 20 years (Angelusz & Tardos, 2000). Because of this unexpected transition, Hungarian society did not have time to prepare for the changes, which led to a general feeling of lack of control.

Second, there was no revolutionary mood at the time of the transition. Before the collapse of the socialist system, and especially in the early eighties, Hungary was the "happiest barrack" among the members of the Eastern block, with a lower level of political repression and a higher level of living standards. This kind of soft "goulash communism" was successful in diluting revolutionary sentiments and anger against the regime (Vásárhelyi, 1995). The most popular politician at the time of the transition was a reform communist politician: Imre Pozsgay (Kurtán, Sándor, & Vass, 1990). "Push" factors from state socialism to democracy were weaker in Hungary than in Poland.

Third, uncertainties emerged as the transition destroyed traditional frames of reference. Geopolitical friends and enemies swapped places. Ratings of the United States rose sharply as a result of the transition while the Soviet Union's took a nosedive. The reputation of heroic occupations of the socialist regime (e.g., workers) declined dramatically, while new heroes emerged, such as "entrepreneurs". A loss of collective self-esteem followed: the self-evaluation of Hungarians through autostereotypes changed in a negative direction (Hunyady, 2002). This may also have feed conspiracy theories, as they can be a cure for wounded collective self-esteem (Crocker et al., 1999).

Fourth, scapegoating ideologies emerged as frustrations grew (Pataki, 2000). The regime change in Central and Eastern Europe led to the "Democratization of hostility" (Bustikova, 2015): the emergence of hate speech and political forces that embrace it as a side-effect of the appearance of freedom of speech. Anti-semitism - often in the form of conspiratorial stereotypes - was prevalent in the years following the transition, and Jews were often blamed for the economic and political troubles (Kovács, 2010).

Fifth, disillusionment and socialist nostalgia quickly returned. As economic problems ran high (rising unemployment, skyrocketing inflation), and the feeling of uncertainty

became widespread, economical and also political disillusionment of the new system became dominant (Kolosi & Róbert, 1991; Vászárhelyi, 1995). Disillusionment and subsequent political nostalgia helped the socialist party (successor of the communist party) to gain an absolute majority on the second post-transition parliamentary elections in 1994. The dynamic after the transition was simple: the general discontent with the transition and socialist nostalgia always increased when the sentiment in the country decreased. This dynamic had a long-term effect on the fate of the regime. The bottom line was 2009. As a Pew Research poll from that year found (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2009), Hungarians were the least satisfied in the post-communist block with the results of the transition: democracy and market capitalism. Also, they were the least trustful of democratic institutions. It helped Fidesz as a populist right party to do a "second transition", a complete readjustment of the institutional system after returning to power in 2010.

## The Myth of the Stolen Transition and Conspiracy Theories

Soon after the first multi-party elections in 1990, economic and social problems that had been unknown during the socialist period, such as the collapse of the unsustainable heavy industry, and rising unemployment, led to a strong disillusionment regarding the whole transition. This disillusionment, combined with suspicion, resulted in a popular populist narrative: the transformation process was only a plot of the international elites against the Hungarian people. István Csurka, a populist antisemitic politician who started his career at the senior, centre-right governmental party MDF, published an article that became infamous for its radical claims - and led to his expulsion from the party. In this article, he claimed that "*the transition ensured the Hungarian financial sector to stay in place, and hold all the influence [ . . . ] to help to save the comrades and their secrets worthy of further secrecy*" (Csurka, 1992, quoted and translated by Krekó & Mayer, 2015, p. 195). This writing, full of anti-capitalist, anti-communist, and anti-semitic narratives, became a famous and infamous source of the conspiracy theories of the "stolen transition", cheered by the - at that time, not so mainstream - populist and radical right.

But there was a definite demand for the populist imagination on the "stolen transition", full of obsession with conspiracy theories. One symbolic conspiracy narrative became highly popular: the theory of the "Rózsadomb Pact" (Paksa, 2013). The central thesis was that the Hungarian communists, opposition politicians, and religious leaders made a pact with the Soviet, Israeli, and US secret services on the peaceful transformation on 15th March 1991 in a mansion in Budapest. According to this secret pact, the old elites could save their power and avoid any negative consequences. According to this fabricated story, they agreed on 20 points, including that the judiciary and state money remain in the hands of communists.

This conspiracy theory is quite similar to the Magdalenka conspiracy theory in Poland, which claims that there was a secret power-sharing agreement between the participants of the Round Table Talks – in Magdalenka, the very place where the discussions were held. This theory became a constant reference point for the Polish nationalist-populist right (see, e.g., Zięba, 2019).

This was also the case for its Hungarian counterpart. The story of the “Rózsadomb Pact” became highly popular for the Hungarian populist radical right, and picked up by its parties, including the far-right anti-semitic MIEP, the agrarian populist party FKGP, and later Jobbik. The story, published in 1992 in a Northern American ex-pat antisemitic paper (“Amerikai-Kanadai Magyar Élet”), is full of mythical elements that make it seem like a fairy tale. For example, 13 people were sitting around the table. They undersigned the pact on 15th March – on the most sacred national celebration of Hungarian freedom fighting and sovereignty, commemorating the freedom fight against the Habsburg empire in 1848-1849. After the participants undersigned the agreement, they “disappeared in the nightlife of Pest” (Krekó, 2018; Paksa, 2013).

The beauty of the “Rózsadomb Pact” story is that it condenses the most important conflicts of the transition that were dominant in society at that time (Krekó, 2018):

1. The feeling of loss of control and limited sovereignty, given the elite-driven and geopolitical nature of the transition.
2. Rising anti-elite sentiments as a consequence of increasing social inequalities. It is not just by mistake that the Pact was born in a mansion in Rózsadomb: this is one of the most luxurious neighborhoods of uphill Buda (the richer side of Budapest).
3. Blaming the external powers and the minority groups (especially the Jews) as the ultimate conspirators for the shortcomings and problems associated with the transition.
4. The myth of the “stolen transition”, which frames every social-political change as manipulation by elite forces to save the power of the members of the former communist establishment.

While this theory, which has even less connection to reality than the Magdalenka theory, is an extreme case, elements of this conspiracy theory became widespread among the Hungarian public, as empirical studies show. Right after the transition, 53 percent of respondents agreed that “Hungary still serves the interests of foreign powers today”, and 48 percent agreed that “The transition was equal to selling out the country”. Thirty-eight percent of Hungarians stated that there was no real transition in Hungary, as the power remained in the same hands. Thirty-nine percent of Hungarians said that there was no real transition as the communists could return to power. These kinds of (anti-communist) conspiratorial attitudes were stronger on the right side of the political spectrum. Importantly, among voters of the then strongly liberal Fidesz as well. The

opinion that a revolutionary transition would have been better than a negotiated one was also widespread (Vásárhelyi, 2007).

## The Transformative Power of the “Stolen Transition” Theory

While the transition and its legacy, in general, is a critical issue in public discussions even today (2020 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first democratic elections), the Round Table Talks, in particular, are much less part of current public discourse in Hungary than they are in Poland. At the same time, conspiratorial criticism of the transition profoundly shaped the political system in the last decade.

While Fidesz voters had strong anti-communist sentiments in the time of the transition, Fidesz, as a radical liberal opposition party then, strongly rejected the proponents of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. One of the most influential leaders of Fidesz called this pamphlet “the fundament of Hungarian Nazism” (Kövér, 1992), and Viktor Orbán also distanced himself from Csurka (Ács, 2017), but as time passed, Csurka's legacy became more and more mainstream on the Hungarian right. As Fidesz turned into an authoritarian nationalist-populist party, it embraced some core ideas of Csurka's legacy – but not the openly anti-Semitic ones. In a 2016 speech, Orbán quoted István Csurka, who claimed that liberals wanted to sit in the jury and use their influence secretly instead of winning elections openly (Csuha, 2016).

As Fidesz shifted more to the right, the myth of a stolen transition became more and more central. And not only in political rhetoric. It became an essential driver of institutional changes that the Orbán-government implemented after returning to power in 2010 with a supermajority that allowed them to re-write the whole legal system, including the Constitution as well (Krekó & Mayer, 2015). Viktor Orbán argued that the “old”, communist elites could save their positions – which later served as a justification for the systemic changes. *“Today we can clearly state that what has happened 20 years ago, the dismantling of the dictatorship and the achievement of freedom, it marked only the beginning of a provisional period. A provisional period which can be characterized by the simultaneous co-existence of the old and the new. They not only co-exist but fight each other, [...] the old world having significant, invisible advantages by its side”* (Viktor Orbán, 2009, quoted by Krekó & Mayer, 2015, p. 187). Later he labeled his governance as a “second transition,” and then it evolved into a “Christian transition” (Orbán, 2019).

These conspiracy theories helped transformative changes 20 years after the transition, when the populist right and far-right exploded in Hungary on the elections. The radical right Jobbik party could gain 15 percent of the vote in 2010 with the message “20 years for 20 years”- meaning: politicians who participated in the transition would deserve 20 years in prison. Fidesz, promising a “Second transition” at the ballot boxes, could gain a two-thirds electoral victory, opening the door for constitutional changes that helped

to demolish the democratic institutions and the system of checks and balances - for the most valuable result of the transition process (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018).

The government of Viktor Orbán also helped in the institutionalization of the conspiracy theories surrounding the transition. For example, an Institute on Research of the History of the Transition was established after 2010 with a yearly budget of around 1.2 million Euros, and with the mission to change discourse on the transition. The leader of the institution, Zoltán Bíró, was a member of MSZMP before the transition and then became the first president of the center-right MDF. But he was consistent in the sense that he rejected the idea of the Round Table Talks at the times of the transition - and then became a strong advocate of the myth of the stolen transition.

## Transition, Round Table Talks and Conspiracy Theories

The many similarities between conspiracy narratives in Hungary and Poland suggest that there are universal features of negotiated transitions and Round Table Talks that make them easy targets for conspiracy theorists.

While negotiated transitions are based on compromises, populist narratives that embrace conspiracy theories tend to reject those compromises. Conspiracy theories are populist by nature, as they express the view that elites are secretly implementing a plot against the people (Yablokov, 2015). In line with this, support for conspiracy theories is higher among voters of populist right parties (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017). An inherent feature of populism is a black and white worldview, the understanding of politics as an eternal fight between Good and Evil, (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014). This Manichean Worldview rejects any kind of compromise, negotiation, and cooperation with the other side. Why? In the words of Janusz Reykowski (2020, this issue) “*cooperation and compromise with staunch enemies is an act of betrayal*” (p. 22). Additionally, populists have a point when criticizing the Round Table Talks, as their very idea is elitist: the (often self-proclaimed) representatives of the political elites make a deal, so they can easily be framed in the populist rhetoric as undemocratic, non-transparent “closed-door agreements” that ordinary people cannot influence and control.

As Janusz Grzelak (2020, this issue) importantly noted about the beginning of the Round Table Talks: “*The out-group was viewed as homogeneous. It took time to see differences, to see the heterogeneity of the other side*” (p. 4). This nuanced perception is against the very idea of the populist worldview. Keeping up the black-and-white dichotomy, on the other hand, helps to create a more coherent story for today that is as easy to be told as a fairy tale. As Janusz Reykowski (2020, this issue) puts it: Round Table is a “*convenient weapon in political battles – it serves the delegitimization of their rivals*” (p. 23).

Populist politicians in both countries have a keen interest in painting anything about compromise as sinful and dirty and morally unacceptable. It is ironic and telling at



the same time that those same politicians who participated in the Round Table Talks themselves are the ones that most loudly criticize the achievements of these Round Tables - such as Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. At the same time, some politicians who made compromises with the socialist regime in the past (e.g., István Csurka himself, who was an agent of the secret services) are painted like uncompromised heroes today.

While populist politicians tend to oversimplify moral problems around the transitions, the moral dilemmas behind the Round Table Talks are indeed difficult. Even if the Round Tables happened in a period in both countries when socialist rule was far softer than in the beginning, Janusz Grzelak (2020, this issue) is right in his characterization about the regime: *"It is true that the Polish People's Republic was a totalitarian and non-sovereign regime, a dictatorship where human rights and freedoms were violated everyday, and where, with almost no exception, a precondition for any career was affiliation to and being loyal to the ruling party, where prisons were filled with political prisoners"* (p. 2). The logic of negotiated transitions is to focus more on the practical outcome than on moral judgments. The precondition for the negotiation is to sacrifice short-term moral responses (e.g., "we do not negotiate with dictators") on the altar of pragmatic considerations. At the same time, this step is not amoral: the goal is a peaceful, non-violent transition – a longer-term moral consideration. Given that transitions are never perfect, they will always be the target to some hindsight and counterfactual criticism: the very reason for our problems today is the negotiation itself as the Original Sin, as it brought the Evil to the table.

There is also another reason as to why the transitions, both in Poland and Hungary, induced cascades of conspiracy theories. Transformations are generally mass-scale, partially unexpected systemic changes with multiple consequences, among them some robustly negative ones. They have an impact on everyone in society. Members of these societies, for good reasons, can feel that they lack agency and real control over the events, as everything is decided "above" them: at the domestic and international negotiation tables. Unexpected events that have a substantial impact often induce conspiracy theories as a form of "collective motivated cognition" that helps members of the community to make sense of what happened and deal with its psychological consequences (Krekó, 2015). Conspiracy theories help to cope with uncertainty (van Prooijen, 2018). In a time of significant changes and social-political cataclysms, conspiracy theories flourish (Gyárfášová et al., 2013). The transformation from a more predictable state socialist system to a more uncertain democratic and capitalist system was precisely such a kind of cataclysm.

## Closing Remarks

The Hungarian transition shows many similarities to the Polish one: it was also a negotiated, "smooth" transition, and furthermore the Round Table Talks were strongly inspired by the Polish Round Table Talks. Also, the transition process and the Round Table Talks themselves are strongly challenged nowadays by the populist right in both countries - ironically, often by the same politicians who themselves participated in the Round Table Talks. Moreover, in both countries, these conspiracy theories might have helped in the "second transitions": the illiberal turn after 2010 in Hungary and 2015 in Poland.

Conspiracy theories seem to be the belated revenge of the "smooth transitions" in both Hungary and Poland. They paved the way for institutional changes at a time of the transition but gave way to a robust populist suspicion that erodes the democratic systems in both countries today. Janusz Grzelak (2020, this issue) wrote that *"It is not an accident that the bloodless revolution happened first in Poland"* (p. 2). But it might also not be an accident that in Hungary, the perception of the transition is similarly ambivalent as in Poland, with a thick fog of suspicion and conspiracies surrounding the events.

The transition process in Hungary was imperfect in many ways: with regard to revealing the identities of the people who cooperated with the secret services, abuses around privatization, to name a few. Still, it deserves more credit than it currently has. Hungary "celebrates" the 30th anniversary of the transition almost in silence, and the low-scale, obligatory state events lack any cathartic element. Also, they are often used as tools to build a further personal cult, painting Fidesz and the Prime Minister as the real (and only) heroes of the transition. 30 years after the transition, Viktor Orbán claims that he is the one who fulfilled the wishes of the first post-democratic prime minister (Orbán, 2019): *"in 2010 we heeded the advice of József Antall: 'It would have been good to carry out a revolution!' Well, we did, we carried out a revolution: a constitutional revolution with a two-thirds majority; a second political transformation"*.

We cannot draw a clear causality about the events we observe in the laboratory of history. We cannot prove as scientists that the conspiracy theories proliferated around the Round Table Talks – and their exploitation by nationalist populists - really contributed to the erosion of democratic norms and institutions. Still, the central role of such theories in justifying the institutional changes let us draw some cautious general conclusions. The story of Hungary suggests that negotiated democratic transitions can backfire later. They create mistrust and conspiracy theories that can be exploited and amplified by populists to promote a post-democratic, illiberal "second transition" that demolishes the results of the first one.

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