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REVIEW ARTICLE



An aborted democracy?: The Hungarian experience

Eszter Bartha

Alexandre Lamfalussy Faculty of Economics, University of Sopron, Sopron, Hungary

Contemporary Hungarian Society: Social Changes in Hungary from Late State Socialism, by Tibor Valuch, London and New York, Routledge, 2025, £136, 336 pp. (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-032-35163-6

From the perspective of the global academic world, it is a valid question of why a relatively small and semi-peripheral country located in East-Central Europe can deserve an international attention. This question can be answered both from a historical and a sociological perspective. The Hungarian revolution of 1956 undoubtedly marked a crisis in the Stalinist-type regimes not only because of the Soviet oppression of the revolution but also because of the mass participation of workers in the demonstrations, protests and the subsequent freedom fight. Workers' resistance continued even after the military oppression of the revolution, and the newly organized Communist party had to make significant efforts to dissolve the workers' councils and put down the strikes.

As the Eastern European Communist parties claimed to rule in the name of the working class, the armed opposition of the workers against the regime indicated a serious crisis of the legitimacy of political power. While open resistance could have been put down through using means of repression and persecution, the consolidation of the regime and the popular acceptance of the new government led by János Kádár required more consensual and enticing methods. This was the political background of what has become known as the standard-of-living policy, which promised significant material and social(ist) concessions to the working people (pay increases, better, state-provided housing, the increase of the supply of consumer goods, the support of working-class culture and education and the training of working-class leaders, technocrats and managers). This policy started to bear real fruits in the late 1960s and '70s, when an additional condition facilitated the establishment of the Hungarian refrigerator socialism or goulash Communism. Following the period of thaw under Khrushchev, economic reforms were implemented in almost all of satellite countries, which cautiously aimed at deregulation, decentralization and the introduction of new economic incentives. The oppression of the Prague Spring and the rehardening of the Soviet line under Brezhnev triggered the halt of these reforms. The Hungarian model, however, proved to be more resilient. Thanks to the centrist policy of Kádár, who could establish a delicate balance between the hardliner and reformist wings of the Hungarian Communist party, the New Economic Mechanism (NEM)

CONTACT Eszter Bartha  barthaeszter@hotmail.com

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introduced in 1968 largely survived the period of 1972–1974, which Zsuzsanna Varga called a “conservative semi-turn” in the politics of the party. The NEM laid the foundation of Hungary’s goulash Communism, which is also referred to as socialist mixed economy in the literature. This model triggered attention also in the West, and the more liberal climate of the late ‘70s and ‘80s enabled researchers such as Chris Hann, Nigel Swain, Martha Lampland and Michael Burawoy to study the working of this “hybrid” social(ist) experiment in the field. In comparison with the more repressive dictatorships in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland or Romania, Hungary’s feasible socialism (using the term of Nigel Swain) undoubtedly represented a more attractive model, which many even saw as a successful mix of socialism and market economy (albeit the latter was always auxiliary to planned economy and the state-owned factories; in addition, the borders between the second, informal or shadow economy and the legalized private sector remained blurred and subject to informal bargaining).

From a sociological angle, the Hungarian system, which has been formed after 2010, and termed “illiberal democracy” by Viktor Orbán, who has been Prime Minister from 2010 until the present day, attracted a different kind of Western academic and public interest. While the Hungarian variant of state socialism received a sympathetic evaluation even from people, who were opponents of the Communist dictatorships, Orbán’s illiberal regime – which Tibor Valuch calls illiberal autocracy – has been first widely criticized and later uniformly and irreversibly rejected by the international and domestic supporters of the Western-type liberal democracies. While there were other countries, which have embarked on the Hungarian path, and we can find many other radical right-parties both in the West and the East, whose leaders see the current Hungarian system as a role model, it is also equally true that the Hungarian Prime Minister has to face a firm rejection or even hostility by the leaders of the Western-type democracies and the conservative right-wing, centrist, liberal and left-wing parties and their followers.

Given the global dimension of radical right-wing populism, the Hungarian case has again received increasing international attention both from Western academics and the Hungarian opponents of the regime, many of whom continued their academic career in Western countries. Tibor Valuch’s new book, however, provides many new insights into the birth of illiberalism in Hungary and the social-political context that gave rise to Orbán’s incontestable success to establish a far-right wing, autocratic regime, which to the present day continues to destroy or hollow out democratic institutions, limit human rights and rule through over dictatorial methods.

The first important merit of the book that I single out is the use of the historical method. Tibor Valuch is a distinguished social historian in Hungary, who was the first to study the socio-political embeddedness of the Kádár-regime, exploring topics such as socialist consumption, fashion, labour and the formation of gender relations. He wrote the first comprehensive book of the social history of the Kádár-regime. He also has valuable studies on the democratic oppositional movements and the political and cultural activities of dissident intellectuals. His firm establishment in the scholarship on contemporary Hungary naturally gives him an in-depth knowledge and a wide and diverse perspective on the state socialist period. The book convincingly proves that many reasons for the so far successful establishment (and many even believe that the consolidation) of illiberalism in Hungary stem from the political socialization of ordinary people under the state socialist era, which of course, transmitted the heritage of the interwar era characterized

by the survival of feudal structures, mentalities and behavioural patterns, the effective exclusion of the lower classes from political participation and representation, an unequal and hierarchical educational system, where college and university education was highly elitist and exclusive, and very limited social mobility. This legacy was certainly not very conducive to the creation of democratic institutions and a Western-type democracy; further, the post-war division of Europe and the Cold War effectively excluded this possibility. While the political compromise between the Communist party and the working people and the consolidation of the Kádár-regime enabled a more liveable socialism in Hungary than in the neighbouring countries, Tibor Valuch also stresses the drawbacks, which impeded the process of democratization after 1989: growing materialism, individual bargaining instead of collective action and a conscious withdrawal from the political institutions and politics in general. Contrary to countries such as Poland, where there was a large and organized oppositionist movement or even countries such as Czechoslovakia where tacit discontent culminated in the Velvet Revolution, dissent in Hungary was limited to a narrow group of intellectuals, who were isolated from ordinary people not only because of the party control but also because the latter were largely disinterested in a real political change or a quest for an alternative system. The author, who in the second half of the 1980s himself belonged to the political opposition, has the courage to conclude: "Society either did not or only minimally supported the political organizations of the opposition. In essence, this stance of 'maintaining a distance' caused and partly explains the weak level of political activity that occurred during the regime change and during the decades of the post-communist transition" (Valuch 2025, 208).

Another merit of the book is the interdisciplinary approach, as the author combines classical sociological analysis with methods drawn from contemporary historical and political studies, new approaches in political economy and sociography and the diverse use of statistical data. The book demonstrates the author's in-depth knowledge of both the system critical literature produced under state socialism and a diverse array of the voluminous sociological and political literature published after the regime change as well as the new system critical approaches, which shed light on the negative aspects of capitalist transformation and seek an answer to the question of why the postsocialist economic, social and political changes failed to create a strong and resistant democracy in Hungary.

This leads us to the third important aspect that needs to be singled out. The author raises two significant questions in the introduction that are systematically explored in the book: "Did Hungarian society become more integrated or – instead – disintegrate as a consequence of the transition?" (Valuch 2025, 2) and "What type of societal background determined the growth and influence of populism in certain nations within this region, a factor that mainly has had a lengthy duration in Hungarian, thereby causing systemic changes in the areas of politics, economics, and society?" (Valuch 2025, 3).

In the light of statistical data, public opinion polls, a diverse set of political studies, sociological analyses and conclusions drawn from the field of contemporary critical literature, the author's answer to the first question is mostly negative, while he objectively avoids any nostalgia for the Kádár-regime, which he also sees as a society which already lacked social cohesion and a real solidarity. Tendencies of disintegration, the growing material and social distance between the newly formed privileged groups and ordinary people, and the increasing mistrust of the lower and middle classes in the political and

economic elite, however, accelerated during the years of transition, leading to a widespread disappointment with the newly established democracy and the liberal and postcommunist elites, who were seen as the main beneficiaries of the transformation of property relations and the privatization of state property. In fact, in the early 2000s, opinion polls showed that Hungarians viewed the regime change the most negatively in East-Central Europe. The author states: "Instead of the much-awaited and longed-for creation of social wellbeing that would be capable of providing long-term guarantees and a balanced, modern society, what emerged was a markedly polarized, fragmented, and disintegrated society that additionally lacked a sense of solidarity" (Valuch 2025, 8).

Tibor Valuch makes an additional point, whose significance became even more evident with the establishment and subsequent consolidation of what he calls an authoritative, illiberal system: the essential lack of a common historical narrative, which resulted in a fragmented sense of national consciousness and historical awareness. In the 2000s, the lack of a consensual relationship to the past enabled the right-wing political forces to appropriate national identity and consciousness, effectively excluding left-wing and liberal supporters from the body of the nation, and hence, the representation of the homeland. With this move, the right wing reached back to an old fault line in Hungarian politics, one that set the homeland and progress in opposition to one another while stating that only the right wing can create a homeland. "What resulted from this was the emergence of a new, right-wing identity that, for many right-wing sympathizers, made the leading, right-wing party more attractive" (Valuch 2025, 209).

The book gives a detailed and informative analysis of various aspects of the radical and profound transformations that accompanied the regime change including a long-term analysis of demographic changes, spatial distribution, minority groups and ethnicities, social stratification, the characteristics of the emergent social groups, political attitudes, social norms and value systems and social relations. In what follows, some features will be mentioned that support the overall claim of the author that the transition years and the illiberal regime failed to close the economic and material gap between the East and West; in fact, the position of Hungary deteriorated even in comparison with other Central European countries. With respect to the demographic changes, the author, for instance, mentions the statistical method known as "the years of life lost," or YLL, which is used to evaluate the circumstances surrounding mortality and, by extension, the level of quality of life. This indicator demonstrates how many years the average Hungarian citizen loses by not experiencing the 70th year of life. The results show that while this indicator shows a great variety according to the categories of region and gender, the quality of life accessible for Hungarians today falls short of what could be possible while additionally failing to meet the EU average (Valuch 2025, 48).

The spatial distribution of the population likewise displays great inequalities in the access to infrastructure, workplaces and other resources such as quality healthcare and education. While the capital city and Western Hungary attracted significant multinational investments, regions, which underwent processes of massive deindustrialization during the transition years, often witnessed accelerating processes of disintegration and social and economic decline. The hinterland of the vanishing factory towns and the centres of heavy industry and mining experienced an even graver decline: as the author notes, in the 2010s, most of the "brownfield" regions that were dominated by small villages, poor

access to transportation, and a dearth of employment fell behind permanently, thereby forming what could be described as “another Hungary” (Valuch 2025, 66).

Many of what we can call social ghettos are also ethnicized. In the past 30 years, within the entire Roma population, settlements located along the periphery or in unfavourable locations saw the largest increase in a proportion of Roma residents (p. 98). The improvement of the situation of the Roma minority is all the more a pressing social question as according to the researchers’ estimate, in the 2010s, the actual Roma population was between 600,000 and 700,000 (in comparison to 320,000 according to an 1971 survey). While it is not, of course, only Roma people, who are exposed to or threatened by poverty, in their case we can often speak of multiple deprivation. According to data gathered by the 2015 Roma Inclusion Index, 23% of school-aged Roma children did not finish elementary school, while only one-sixth were accepted to secondary school. The proportion of those who finished university was a total of 1%. The illiteracy rate meanwhile rose above 5%. Since education largely determines the chances of employment, these data indicate a serious disadvantage in the life chances of Roma people. The author also notes the lack of voice amongst the disadvantages, noting that the majority of the research on this group is conducted *about* the Roma rather than *by* them, which often impedes the implementation of social policies, which have a durable positive impact on the material and social situation and employment chances of this ethnic group.

One of the most illuminating parts of the book are the chapters on social stratification and its linking to collective norms, values and social relations. Hereby I focus on labour and the workers, on which the author conducted valuable research. While under the Kádár-regime, we can speak of a large socialist middle class (or petite bourgeois layer) in the 1990s significant segments of this group experienced proletarianization and economic-social marginalization, and fell out of the new, capitalist middle class. It is also important to note that illegal work has become continuous and widespread. As a consequence, it is difficult to assess the extent of how much work is done “under the table” or left unreported or unregistered.

Communist propaganda constructed the working class as a homogeneous and united group, sharing common interests and values and possessing a common consciousness. While in reality, workers constituted a stratified group even under state socialism, Tibor Valuch shows that by now, this group has been even more stratified. At the top we can find the techno-working class encompassing well-trained, physical labourers who combine their physical strength and vocational knowledge with specific, computer-based skills. They can even be categorized as members of the middle class.

Skills, gender and the urban/rural divide constitute further indicators of the social stratification of the working class. Thus, there are great divisions even within the urban working class. An important factor is the ownership and size of the enterprise where the individual works: multinational corporations or large-scale business enterprises usually offer better work conditions and career opportunities than Hungarian small-, or medium firms, even though these differences also depend on whether the individual possesses skills which are indispensable for the enterprise. The author also notes that because of these diverse differences in the living and working conditions, not even the urban working class can be viewed as a uniform social class nor can we speak of a common consciousness – be it class consciousness driven from the Marxist or neo-Marxist interpretations or a more broadly defined working-class identity uniting workers, who share

a common culture, values, norms, social and political ideas and behavioural patterns. Instead, the majority of labourers, who are employed in physical jobs, tend to view themselves as “operators” rather than workers. This difference in perception means both a repositioning and a means of distancing themselves from the traditional working class. Employment, however, does not mean a secure livelihood in Hungary: based on the status indexes developed by Tamás Kolosi and Péter Róbert, unskilled labourers and physical labourers in agriculture whose status index is within the lower three deciles, can be categorized as a deprived social group.

The fragmentation and the high level of stratification of the traditional working class “inherited” from state socialism partly explain the remarkable weakness of the lobbying and organizing capability of various working class or employed strata. It is characteristic in this respect that in Hungary, out of all the institutions and organizations found in the country, labour unions figure among the least-respected institutions and are regarded with great suspicion. This lack of respect and trust has had a long history. Under state socialism, trade unions were state-controlled and highly centralized. Given the strict control of the state party, they had a very limited scope of manoeuvre, and they enjoyed very little credit in the workers’ eye; in fact, it was a widely spread view that their most important task was to allocate the summer holiday places. The extension of the second or informal economy also strengthened individualization and at the same time, weakened group solidarity. Workers used individual means and informal bargaining to enforce their interests, and they were disinterested in building up a social opposition to the regime. This climate was not conducive to the creation of new trade unions after the change of regimes, and the newly formed capitalist class was also openly hostile to the representation of labour interests. The situation worsened after the 2010s; even though the ruling party widely propagated a “work-based” society, in fact, it effectively hollowed out both the institutional frames of lobbying for social interests and the right to strike.

These negative social phenomena and experiences greatly undermined popular trust in the newly established parliamentary democracy and the democratic parties, which were held to be responsible for the new poverty and the great inequalities and economic-social distance between the new elite groups and the lower classes. Just to mention some data listed by the author: in 2006, the renowned Hungarian sociologist, Zsuzsa Ferge was of the opinion that nearly 40% of Hungary’s population lives in poverty or on the edge of it. As regards social mobility, in the 2010s Hungary became one of the most closed nations in the EU 27, where movement among social groups and statuses, or even progressing upward demands greater effort and is possible for a dwindling number of individuals. The sociologist László Laki coined the phrase “wreckage society” in which it could not be expected that an attention to common interests would overwrite the battle for daily subsistence. Not only the groups that stand at the bottom of the social ladder but also part of the middle class, who can no longer keep their former status, experience marginalization and social disintegration.

Disappointment in the democratic institutions and the experience of social disintegration and the lack of solidarity “upgraded” the right-wing, conservative party Fidesz, which promised a new solidarity based on nationalism and the mobilization of national feelings. The success of Fidesz can be partly explained through the effective exclusion of the “left-wing” (liberal and socialist) forces and sympathizers from the body of the nation and the unification of the right-wing political forces (from the centrist to the far-right right). The

party also widely used all means of propaganda, which became even more massive and aggressive after Fidesz won a two-third parliamentary majority in 2010. Tibor Valuch holds this powerful propaganda (which also encompasses an utterly closed information “bubble” for its own voters) to be a very important constituent in the continuing success of the ruling party.

While Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics described the regime that arose in the 2010s as a kind of mafia state, Tibor Valuch places this development in a social historical context. Under state socialism, it has become a widespread practice to “cheat on” the proprietary state and take advantage of legal gaps, which was not condemned by public opinion. This social mentality continued to be persistent (or even more pronounced) after the change of regimes, when Hungarian society has proven extremely creative in the area of hiding income and taxes by outmanoeuvring laws. This is supported by data gathered in a 2009 survey that show that four-fifths of Hungarians believed it impossible to become wealthy via honest means in Hungary, while three-fourths felt it necessary to break certain rules in order to advance socially and financially (Valuch 2025, 241). The author highlights this continuity in social mentality, which partly explains the popularity of the illiberal regime in spite of the widespread corruption, which in the 2010s has become institutionalized.

While the discussion of the Hungarian case nicely combines the interdisciplinary methods and approaches that the author promises in the introduction of the book, I would like to make some critical comments concerning the final chapter, which aims to place the Hungarian transformation between 1980 and 2020 in a wider Central and Eastern European context. The author examines various aspects: political and economic relations, demography, social conditions and the level of quality of life. While one can, of course not expect a full-fledged comparison in one single chapter, it still remains somewhat unclear what rendered the Hungarian case specific after the change of regimes. One of the aims of the author is to offer an in-depth historical-sociological analysis of the dismantling of democracy and the triumph of a right-wing, populist regime in Hungary – an aim, which the book fully realizes. While there were other successful right-wing, populist parties in the region (e.g. in Poland), it still remains a question why Hungary became the role model of “illiberal” transformation. The chapter offers diverse and detailed statistical data of many aspects of social transformation but given the length limits, a more focused view may have been more informative.

This minor critical comment does not concern my general opinion of the several merits of the book that I sought to outline in the review. Tibor Valuch gives a very detailed and substantial analysis of the great social changes that shaped the contemporary Hungarian landscape. The book’s starting point is the last decade of the Kádár-regime, and the author convincingly shows that the “relics” of this social(ist) legacy survived the political change, and became again pronounced in the illiberal regime. The book offers a fresh view on social change in contemporary Hungary and it is highly recommended to an international audience interested in the wider context of postsocialist transformation.