

## Event Report

### BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

#### **Hungary, Romania 1989-2014: Problem Children of the Revolution<sup>1</sup>**

*In the eyes of most West Europeans **Hungary** was the model pupil among the ex-communist EU candidate countries. In 1956 the Hungarians had revolted against communist rule and paid a high price for it. In 1989 Hungary played a crucial role in the collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe when it removed its barbed wire fence with Austria in May allowing East Germans to escape to West Germany through Austria. It was the only Eastern Bloc country that managed political transformation by means of an evolutionary process, with the former communist party (re-inventing itself as Hungarian Socialist Party) playing the key role. In 2003 83% of the Hungarian voters said 'yes' to the European Union. But 25 years after the peaceful revolution and ten years after EU accession Hungary has turned from model pupil to problem child causing many critical voices to even ask for Hungary's exclusion from the EU. **Romania** had a far more difficult road to follow. For a long time the West had mistaken Communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu for a 'reformer', decorated and pampered him and gladly did business with him turning a blind eye to the extent of oppression and corruption which characterised his regime. Romania's revolution in December 1989 was the only violent one of the 1989 popular uprisings. Western Europeans could watch it on television including the execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena on Christmas Day. More than 1000 people died in the wake of the revolution. What followed was often confusing and chaotic. Romania together with its neighbour Bulgaria had to wait till 2007 to join the EU, with many critics claiming that it was still way too early. In the seven years after its accession Romania went through political, constitutional and economic crises providing little hope to its exhausted people. Romania and Hungary: different countries, different histories, different roads travelled, but the questions to be asked are the same: where did things go wrong, what is it the EU could have done differently and what needs to be done to keep both countries on the right track and offer a positive perspective to the people?*

Rather than seeing Romania and Hungary as 'problem children' one should regard the EU as a problem family. Theoretically the responsibility for a better political, economic and social future is shared among the Member States; however, many things went wrong in the family over the

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<sup>1</sup> The event took place on 3 December 2014. Guest speakers were Claudiu Craciun, lecturer in European Politics at the Faculty of Political Science, National School of Political Studies and Administration in Bucharest, Mariann Dosa, DPhil candidate in Comparative Social Policy, University of Oxford and former mentor for the Roma Settlement Elimination Programme of the Hungarian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and Rui Tavares, historian, former Member of the European Parliament and rapporteur on fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law in Hungary. The event was moderated by the director of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, Bastian Hermisson. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

past years. In the current situation, it is important to analyse specific developments in Member States in order to detect individual problems and achieve progress as a union.

### **Romania: mistrust and disappointment**

The Romanian revolution of 1989 is increasingly questioned by many Romanians. A growing number of people now speak of a 'coup d'etat' rather than a revolution. During the 1989 revolution in Romania, the country was facing many obstacles and this was still the case at the point of accession to the EU in 2007. The continuation of the problems is the reason why some people consider the accession too early. One of the main issues when forming a new government in 1990 was that the mixture of reformed communists and democratic contenders still consisted of the old leaders, with Ion Iliescu as spearhead of the socialist party PSD (Partidul Social Democrat). In fact, they were still the old communist political elites who had switched sides during the revolution and whose political programme was not left-wing at all. On the anti-communist side, a coalition of civic, liberal and conservative groups emerged who were trying to break with the old regime. Both political groups were pro-Western. Whereas the right endorsed a quick transition and reforms, the left was in favour of slower changes.

The transition went through violent phases. In the early 1990s it was the 'Piața Universității' movement', a group of people demonstrating for more democracy and against Iliunescu and his social democrats whom they saw as a mere continuation of the Communist Party that developed into the first important civic mass movement. Their demonstration on the University Square in Bucharest was crushed by state police in co-operation with organised miners recruited from Valea Jiului.

The main narrative in Romania's transition became the integration of Romania into the European market economy. This proved to be difficult because the communist modernisation paradigm had linked urban development to the urbanisation of the country which meant that small and medium cities that had grown due to the industry boost now were destined to shrivel. The decline in industrial output paved the way for the economic migration of Romanians towards the EU. The reforms took place too quickly for the economy to adapt; thus a relief of pressure could only be achieved when work-related migration was made possible.

The privatisation process was a combination of economic destruction corruption and pressure from the EU to implement its economic conditionality. At the moment 90% of industrial exports are produced by foreign companies who often come to Romania not because of the quality of infrastructure or the investments in research and development but because of cheap labour cost, which is a problem.

When it comes to political and administrative reforms, changes were made faster but they were just as problematic. The administrative system fell under the competitive and conflictual influences of the political parties who had concentrated power in local governments where the protection of civil servants is weak. Consequently, the democratic concept of decentralisation failed in this respect. While political parties organise themselves around political and administrative centres of power, the basic idea of a programmatic-ideological organisation got lost. This is the reason why – as the polls show – the trust in political parties is distressingly low and amounts to only 10 to 15% whereas the trust in the parliament amounts to 20%. On the other end of the scale are the church and the army in whom 60% of the population trusts. This tells us a lot about the political culture and the political institutions in Romania. Romania today is a low-chance democracy in the sense that the institutions which are fundamental for the democratic process like political parties and the parliament are held in such low esteem.

However, the disappointment about the government has not turned into Euroscepticism. This could still be an effect of the situation under communism when Romania defied Soviet influence focussing on a more national narrative and thereby becoming a preferred partner for the West. Yet, there are some political and economic concerns regarding the EU. There is political concern against the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification. The European Commission issued the MCV in order to close the reform gap in the areas of justice and home affairs and to ensure that the reforms continue. The mechanism actually raised doubts about the Romanian state's institutional capacities and its political desire for reform. Still, the MCV is in fact a breach of the equal treatment of Member States guaranteed in the treaties because it applies only to Romania and Bulgaria. In that respect, mistrust is reaped where it is sowed. Romanians also show some sullenness in respect of the EU as they see the EU as an economic core that mistreats its periphery while exploiting its resources. Still, in spite of everything, EU integration is still seen as the ideal path towards stability and a reliable instrument to prevent crises.

On the downside, with the accession to the EU in 2007, Romania also became the victim of the economic and financial crisis that hit the continent later and spilled over to the country. So instead of development, Romanians experienced a prolonged crisis which was reinforced by the centre-right government that imposed harsh austerity policies. The impact of the crisis resulted in reform fatigue and made society and elites unable to find a new consensus on important strategic issues. In addition to the mistrust of Romanian citizens towards their government, the international community leaves only little room for participation and political alternatives which leads to Romanians turning to their past and forgetting about their revolutionary power. Maybe it is time for another revolution. This is not an impossible project; the recent election of an ethnic German Lutheran to become president who is married but has no children shows that Romanians are not necessarily bound to their political and social traditions and eager for change and are ready to choose a more unconventional approach in order to achieve it.

### **Hungarian democracy – a lack of participation**

Looking at the developments in Hungary, there are some concerns regarding democracy issues the country has in common with Romania. Because the Hungarian transition was not an act of participation or a democratic process, it is little surprising that Hungary still has problems with its democracy. The transition was led by an elite consisting of liberals, conservatives and foreigners among which many economists. The legitimacy of the system is fading more and more because people cannot relate to a system in whose construction they could not take part. Because of the lack of civil participation, the interests of people were not addressed and consequently not enforced by law. Democracy as a social construct should have been discussed from the start; what it means, what kind of democracy it is Hungarians want. This act of deliberation would have created a strong foundation for democracy but the contrary happened. The opinion prevails that there was a trade-off during the transition: before, people had many social rights and social security but no political rights and after the transition, people have political rights which are laid down by law but the price they paid was a significant diminish of their social rights. This is, indeed, a very narrow interpretation of fundamental rights because social rights cannot be separated from political rights completely. In some cases there was not even a trade-off, some people did not gain more political rights in exchange for giving up social rights, which makes them citizens by law but they lack means of being able to exercise their rights. There is a massive misbalance between social and political rights which causes inequality for many Hungarian people. What they need is access to information and access to other means to participate in public life. When talking about democracy, one has to talk about the welfare state, too. Both are interrelated issues because a welfare state should empower people to be able to exercise their civil rights. This discourse is missing in Hungary. Just as in

Romania, political parties, social movements and public institutions do not represent civil society as they are supposed to. Also in Brussels not all people with different backgrounds are represented in a genuine way which makes it pressing to change mechanisms in a way that allows a better political participation. Finally, the EU sanction mechanism has to be changed as it makes it very easy for illiberal democracies to make it look as if the means of empowering people are being cut down and to manipulate the sentiments of citizens in an anti-EU direction. The sanctions should be placed in a way that citizens understand why and can see what can be done about it.

### **A common European problem – a common solution**

As pointed out, the blaming of individual states for certain issues is deceptive. Within an interlinked community like the EU, most problems are created commonly and thus can only be solved that way. It would be naive to think that after the EU accession, new Member States are re-born as eternal democracies. The real issue is the implicitness of the 'European promise' compared to the explicitness of the 'American Dream'. Every US citizen is aware of this concept which shows its strength; they can say whether it has worked out for them or not. Considering Europe's history and its diverse temperaments, it is more difficult to create a concept like that because it is too optimistic. The implicit European promise has three different elements: a shared prosperity, e.g. the welfare state as part of democracy, the fundamental rights for majority and minorities alike and popular sovereignty or democracy. All these elements are lacking at the moment. The promise was made but not delivered. But unlike the American Dream, the European promise is not something which will happen to people (or not); the promise has to be given to one another making it a group effort but Europeans have failed to recognise their own responsibility in this. Instead of pointing at each other, Member States should realise that the cause of the current problems is the EU's broken framework.

Not only Romania and Hungary need a second revolution, so does the whole of Europe; a revolution which is focussed on democracy, welfare and fundamental rights. Such a revolution is possible; we can only hope that it will be peaceful and positive and shared by everybody and not be the ugly product of frustration and anger against Brussels and national politicians. In order to make this a positive process, we need is a *European civil rights movement*. What we also need is a '*Copenhagen Commission*' which extends the obligations of the Copenhagen admission criteria to the EU as a kind of advisory institutions to the EU without having the problems of the EU Council where every country fears to be the next in row to be criticised and will try to cover up for the others or the Commission that has problems with its democratic legitimacy or the European Parliament, where either MEPs from different countries will engage in rhetorical fighting or it will end in a gentleman's agreement between the two big political groups on not attacking a country of which the government is of their respective political colour. A 'Copenhagen Commission' would address countries directly, write non-binding reports and give some normative opinions on the situation in each of them.

The *Fundamental Rights Agency* of the EU has to be put to good use. A goal should be to abolish **article 51** of the Charter of Fundamental Rights which, in fact, makes these rights disappear because they are not guaranteed on national level. A European civil rights movement could fight for the actual realisation of these fundamental rights in all Member States.

The task for European policy makers in the current situation is to come up fast with simple answers to the many complex problems Europe is facing. What is urgently needed is smart simplicity. If these smart and simple answers are not provided, more and more people will turn to opportunistic populists and their simple but stupid answers.