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From Communism to Democracy: The Democratic Transition in Hungary

Komünizmden Demokrasiye: Macaristan'da Demokratik Geçiş

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Abstract
Hungary's transition from communism to democracy presented a series of profound challenges, highlighting the complexities inherent in post-communist transformations. This study addresses the central research question: What were the internal and external factors facilitated Hungary's relatively peaceful transition to democracy, and how did these shape its political, economic, and institutional trajectories? Despite the peaceful nature of the transition, the process was marked by substantial difficulties in the political, economic, and institutional domains. Politically, the legacy of the one-party system posed significant hurdles to the establishment of a stable multi-party democracy. The National Round Table negotiations, though crucial to the peaceful transition, were fraught with tensions as competing factions representing the ruling elite and opposition struggled over the pace, scope, and direction of reform. This discord reflected deeper uncertainties about Hungary's post-communist identity and governance structures. Institutionally, the consolidation of democracy was hindered by weak state capacity and the challenge of establishing the rule of law. The legacy of authoritarianism fostered public scepticism toward newly formed political institutions, exacerbated by concerns over corruption and governance deficits. Ultimately, Hungary's democratic transition underscores the broader difficulties faced by post-communist states as they sought to reconcile the legacies of authoritarianism with the demands of democratisation and economic modernisation. The Hungarian case illustrates how external pressures and internal dynamics can interact to shape the trajectory of democratic transitions, offering critical insights into the broader process of post-authoritarian democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe.

Key words: Hungary, Democratic Transition, Post-Communist Hungary, Round Table Talks, Political Reform

Öz
Macaristan'ın komünizmden demokrasiye geçişi, komünizm sonrası dönüşümlerin doğasında var olan karmaşıklıkların altını çizen bir dizi derin zorluk ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu çalışma, merkezi bir araştırma sorusunu ele almayı amaçlamaktadır: Macaristan'ın görece barışçıl demokrasiye geçişini kolaylaştıran iç ve dış faktörler nelerdir ve bunlar ülkenin siyasi, ekonomik ve kurumsal yol haritasını nasıl şekillendirmiştir? Geçişin nispeten barışçıl doğasına rağmen, süreç siyasi, ekonomik ve kurumsal alanlarda önemli zorluklara sahne olmuştur. Siyasi açıdan, tek partili sistemin mirası, istikrarlı birçok partili demokrasinin kurulmasının önünde önemli engeller oluşturmuştur. Öyle ki, Ulusal Yuvarlak Masa müzakereleri, barışçıl geçiş için çok önemli olsa da iktidar elitini ve muhalefeti temsil eden rakip grupların reformun hızı, kapsamı ve yönü üzerinde mücadele etmesi nedeniyle gerginliklerle doluydu. Bu anlaşmazlık Macaristan'ın komünizm sonrası kimliği ve yönetişim yapılarına ilişkin daha derin belirsizlikleri yansıtıyordu. Kurumsal olarak demokrasinin konsolidasyonu, zayıf devlet kapasitesi ve hukukun üstünlüğünü tesis etme zorluğu nedeniyle sekteye uğramıştır. Otoriterliğin mirası, yolsuzluk ve yönetişim açıklarına ilişkin endişelerle daha da kötüleşen, yeni oluşturulan siyasi kurumlara yönelik kamu şüpheciliğini beslemiştir. Sonuç olarak Macaristan'ın demokratik geçişi, otoriterliğin mirasını demokratikleşme ve ekonomik modernleşme talepleriyle uzlaştırmaya çalışan komünizm sonrası devletlerin karşılaştığı daha geniş çaplı zorlukların altını çizmektedir. Macaristan örneği, dış baskıların ve iç dinamiklerin demokratik geçişlerin yörüngesini şekillendirmek için nasıl etkileşime girebileceğini göstermekte ve Orta ve Doğu Avrupa'daki otoriterlik sonrası demokratikleşme sürecine ilişkin kritik bilgiler sunmaktadır.

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Introduction

The collapse of communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s signalled a profound transformation in the global political landscape. Among the countries that underwent significant change, Hungary's transition from communism to democracy stands out for its relatively peaceful and negotiated nature (Solyom, 2003: 154-155). Unlike some of its neighbours, where transitions were marked by violence or prolonged instability, Hungary's move towards democracy was characterised by a series of carefully orchestrated political dialogues, institutional reforms, and civil society engagement. This process was not only influenced by domestic actors but also by broader international dynamics, particularly the declining influence of the Soviet Union and the growing appeal of Western democratic models.

The roots of Hungary's democratic transition can be traced back to the economic and political crises of the 1980s. As Hungary's economy faltered under the weight of inefficiencies inherent in the centrally planned system (Comisso and Marer, 1986), the ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party *(Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, MSZMP)* faced increasing pressure from both the public and reformist elements within the party itself to initiate change (Kornai, 1990). The introduction of economic reforms, such as the New Economic Mechanism *(Új Gazdasági Mechanizmus)* in 1968 (Soos, 1987), had initially provided some relief, but by the late 1980s, it became clear that more profound changes were necessary. The growth of an independent civil society, exemplified by movements such as the Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Magyar Demokrata Fórum, MDF*) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, SZDSZ*), played a crucial role in pushing for political liberalisation and the establishment of a multi-party system.

The geopolitical environment of the late 1980s also played a critical role in shaping Hungary's transition. The weakening grip of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika provided an opportunity for Hungarian leaders to pursue a more independent foreign policy and to explore the possibility of political reforms without the immediate threat of Soviet intervention (Brown, 1996). Furthermore, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent wave of democratisation across Eastern Europe exerted additional pressure on the Hungarian regime to embrace change. By 1989, round table discussions between the government and opposition groups had laid the groundwork for Hungary's first free elections in 1990, marking the official end of communist rule and the beginning of a democratic era (Tökes, 1996).

In this context, Hungary's democratic transition can be understood as the product of both internal reform pressures and external influences. The peaceful nature of the transition, the strategic use of round table negotiations, and the broad participation of civil society are key aspects that set Hungary's experience apart from other post-communist states (Greskovits and Wittenberg, 2016). This article will explore these elements in detail, comprehensively analysing the factors that enabled Hungary to navigate its path from communism to democracy successfully. By examining the Hungarian case, this study contributes to the broader understanding of democratisation processes in post-authoritarian contexts and offers insights into the challenges and opportunities that arise during such transitions.

1. Pre-1989 Hungary

Following the Soviet Union's occupation of Budapest in 1945, the Soviet-backed Hungarian communists, under the leadership of Béla Miklós de Dálnok in Debrecen, established the Counter Provisional National Government/Assembly *(Ideiglenes Nemzetgyűlés)* and overthrew the fascist regime of the Arrow Cross Party - Hungarian Movement *(Nyilaskeresztes Párt - Hungarista*

Mozgalom, NYKP). This marked the beginning of communism in Hungary. The political developments in Hungary, where the communists began consolidating power after the end of the Second World War, were directly reflected in the November 1945 elections. In these elections, the Independent Smallholders, Agrarian Workers, and Civic Party *(Független Kisgazda-, Földmunkás- és Polgári Párt, FKgP)*, supported by both rural and urban populations, won with 57.03% of the vote. Meanwhile, the Soviet-backed Hungarian Communist Party *(Magyar Kommunista Párt, MKP)* secured 16.96%, the Hungarian Social Democratic Party *(Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, MSZDP)* garnered 17.41%, and the National Peasant Party *(Nemzeti Parasztpárt, NPP)* received 6.87%. Despite the FKgP's clear electoral victory, Hungary was governed by a four-party coalition, the *'Communist-Social Democratic Coalition'* (FKgP-MKP-MSZDP-NPP), led by Zoltán Tildy (Mueller, 2010: 105-107). This coalition, in which the communists played an increasingly influential role, was notably interesting, given that the FKgP had won enough votes to govern alone. The coalition's primary aim was to create a united front against fascism and foster national unity and solidarity. The government, which gained the support of Hungarian peasants through land reforms and the nationalisation of the private sector, succeeded in proclaiming the *'People's Republic'* under Soviet control on 1 February 1946 (Hamori, 1964). However, the post-war period was marked by significant challenges, including Hungary's territorial losses to Czechoslovakia under the Paris Peace Treaty, the increasing pressure from communists within the government, and the escalating political risks leading up to the second elections in August 1947[1]. These tensions culminated in the flight of Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy, who, fearing arrest under Soviet pressure, fled the country. As a result, the Hungarian Workers' Party *(Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, MDP)*, a coalition of the MKP and MSZDP led by Mátyás Rákosi, emerged victorious in the 1947 elections.

In the 1949 elections, the MKP and MSZDP, unified under the MDP, secured a decisive victory, leveraging the powers granted[2] by the *'Peace and Friendship Treaty'* between the Soviet Union and Hungary, *'Stalin's Constitution'*, and by making significant concessions to the church and peasants[3], who were central to the anti-communist opposition (Holmes, 1997: 139-140). Following the MDP's triumph in 1949, Hungary was transformed into a *'People's Republic'* under strict communist control, with all other political parties eliminated (Hamori, 1964). Power was consolidated under Mátyás Rákosi, the Secretary General of the MDP and prime minister,

[1] In the elections held in 1947, MKP received 22.25%, FKgP 15.34%, MSZDP 14.86% and the newly established KDNP 16.6% (A.R., 1947). However, these elections were clearly manipulated by the communists in the government and the Moscow administration, and the elections were rigged. Moreover, after these elections, a large-scale *'political cleansing* and *communist terror'* began in Hungary under the leadership of Rákosi (Kodolanyi, 2016).

[2] The *'Peace and Friendship Treaty'* signed between the Soviet Union and Hungary placed the Hungarian economy under Soviet control. Economic control was followed by a comprehensive constitutional amendment, people's co-operatives, *'Stalinist understanding of the state'* and thus *'proletarian dictatorship'* (Borhi, 2012).

[3] Nevertheless, because of the separation of religion and state affairs between 1948 and 1949, religious institutions were neutralised and Cardinal József Mindszenty, the head of Hungarian Catholicism, was neutralised by the new regime (Koranyi, 1989: 25).

who assumed complete control. In essence, Hungary experienced a *'democratic populist revolution'* between 1945 and 1946, followed by a *'socialist revolution'* between 1947 and 1948.

Two key factors distinguish Hungary's post-Second World War period from the previous era. The first is the social traumas and democratic shifts caused by the war. The Second World War devastated the peasantry and middle class, while the Hungarian elite and bourgeoisie fled the country. The second significant factor is the regime change that occurred after the war. Although the MDP government under Rákosi initially supported Hungarian peasants through land reforms and redistribution, the new industrialisation program presented challenges for peasants and the working class. The collectivisation of agriculture, declining prices for products and labour, and widespread shortages created unrest among the Hungarian peasantry and working class, laying the groundwork for the 1956 Uprising. During this period, Soviet political repression stifled any criticism of the regime, particularly among the peasantry, who were unable to express dissent openly. Despite some opposition to the Soviet-imposed economic and social model, these dissenting views remained largely unexpressed. This period of Soviet repression also gave rise to a political discourse in Hungary that criticised Western modernism through cultural, literary, and historical narratives. Other focal points of Hungarian politics during this time included the resurgence of old Hungarian traditions and concerns over the situation of Hungarian minorities living outside the country's borders. During this era, the nationalist interpretation of the Hungarian minority issue, which remains significant in contemporary Hungarian politics, began to emerge.

The autocratic Soviet regime, which faced significant instability following Stalin's death, had a profound impact on Hungary, leading to labour unrest and increasing economic and social demands from the populace. Alarmed by these developments, Soviet leaders Georgy Malenkov and Lavrentiy Beria replaced MDP leader and Hungarian Prime Minister Mátyás Rákosi with Imre Nagy in 1955 (Armaoğlu, 2020). Nagy's appointment marked the beginning of National Communism *(Nemzeti kommunizmus)*, a series of reforms aimed at softening the communist regime in Hungary[4]. Among the most significant of these decisions were Hungary's intent to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact and its application to the United Nations for independence (Holmes, 1997: 140). However, Nagy's[5] dismissal by the Soviet Union in response to these moves triggered a popular uprising in Hungary, where mass protests had already begun. In 1956, as the anti-Soviet events in Hungary escalated, the Soviet Union intervened militarily, occupying Hungary and crushing the mass movements. During this *'first anti-totalitarian revolution'* (Austin, 2021), many Hungarian civilians lost their lives. János Kádár was appointed prime minister, the MDP was disbanded, and it was reconstituted as the MSZMP. From this point onward, Kádár, who had been imprisoned under Rákosi for his nationalist views, solidified his reputation within Hungary. He made significant concessions to right-wing factions and became one of the most popular leaders in the Visegrád region. The New Economic Mechanism *(Új Gazdasági Mechanizmus)*, a radical economic reform package introduced by Kádár in 1968 (Bartha, Krausz and Mezei, 2023), further enhanced his recognition and influence in the region.

2. The Beginning of Democratic Transformation in Hungary and Hungarian Politics

Starting in the 1980s, Hungary began to show signs of liberalisation by introducing rights such as the ability to travel abroad and the freedom to criticise the regime. By the late 1980s, leaders and movements advocating for more radical reforms began to emerge. Hungary, officially known as the Hungarian People's Republic *(Magyar Népköztársaság)*, became the first among the Visegrád

[4] Developments such as the granting of land ownership rights to peasants and greater tolerance of religion.
[5] Nagy, who tried to develop *'a new experience of socialism'* in Hungary, was executed in 1958.

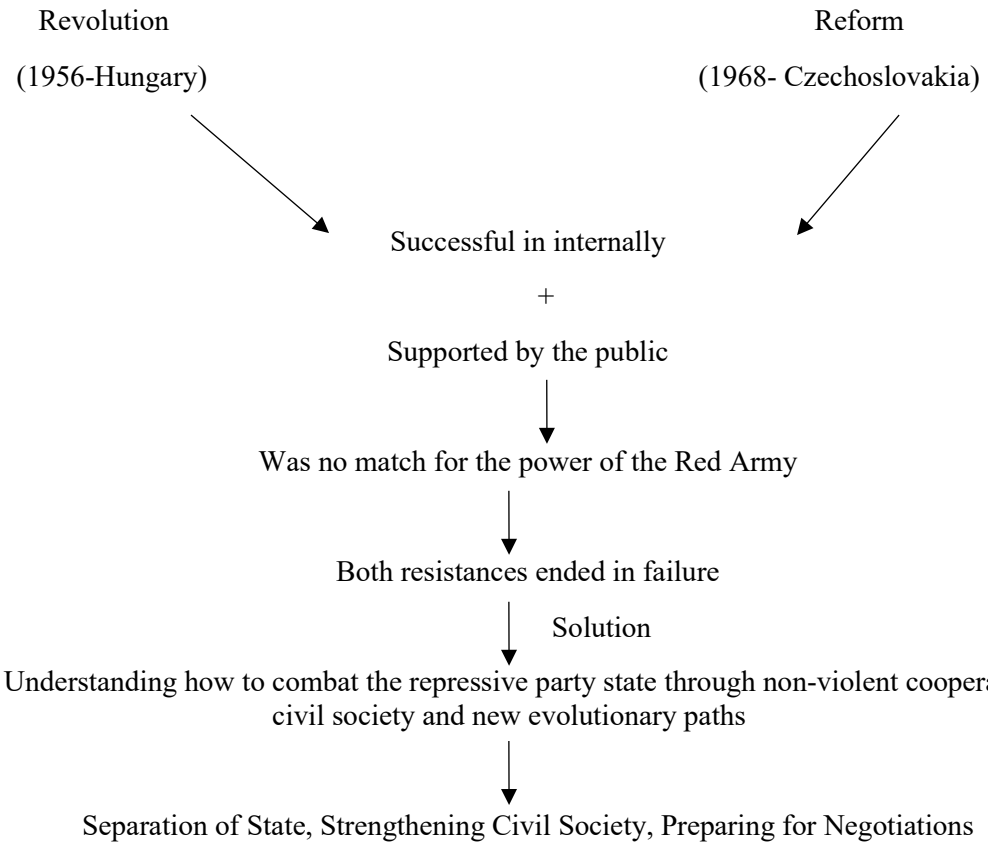
countries to transition toward a capitalist economy (Scheiring, 2020). This shift began with the economic reform decisions made by the MSZMP at its 13th Congress in 1985, aimed at generating alternative resources. These reforms gradually allowed for private property, private enterprise, and capital-labour relations, marking the start of Hungary's economic and political transformation[6] (Csillag, 1995: 89; Sancaktar, 2019: 41). Having joined the International Monetary Fund *(IMF)* in 1982, Hungary further integrated into the global economy by signing a Trade and Economic Co-operation Agreement with the European Community in 1988. The abolition of the state monopoly on trade marked a significant step in Hungary's departure from Soviet influence, as the country increasingly came under the economic sway of the West (Sergender and Çeşmecioğlu, 1998; Buzogany, 2017: 1307).

The increasing economic influence of the West in Hungary also signalled impending political changes in the Hungarian People's Republic. The dynamic rise of civil society movements and the spread of opposition groups[7] since the 1980s allowed independent candidates who were not affiliated with the MSZMP to enter the national parliament, thereby strengthening the opposition within the country (Lewis, 2001). To fully understand the regional domino effect of these changes and the characteristics of the Hungarian opposition that emerged during this period, comparing the Hungarian and Polish opposition movements is appropriate and insightful. Unlike the Polish opposition, which differed significantly from the other Visegrád countries in terms of cultural context, ideological foundation, the oppositional role of the church, organisation, power, and resistance, the Hungarian opposition was more akin to the Czech opposition, exemplified by *Charta 77* (Kopecek, 2019: 278). The Hungarian opposition was more limited in scope, lacked institutional *(church)* support, was intellectually driven, and largely secular. It began to develop in earnest only in the second half of the 1980s.

In contrast, the Polish opposition played a leading role in opening negotiations with the communists, advancing the concept of a *'self-limiting revolution'* (Bachmann, 2015: 49), and providing a model for other opposition groups in the region. This leadership role of the Polish opposition pushed the Hungarian opposition to learn and adopt the strategic and tactical methods employed by their Polish counterparts. While there were previous efforts by the Hungarian and Czechoslovak peoples to challenge the communist regime, it was the rise of the Solidarity *(Solidarność)* movement in Poland, which became the cornerstone of the Polish opposition, that truly catalysed change across the region. The transformation unfolded as follows:

[6] As *'modernisation theory'* gave way to *the 'globalisation paradigm'* in the 1970s, modernisation theory was rapidly adopted in late communist and post-communist Hungary. The modernisation theory, which embodies a universally applicable linear theory of economic and political development, became even more prominent and adopted as the West established its superiority over the Soviet-type countries.

[7] The fragmented structure of the church in Hungary and the fact that Hungarian society followed intellectuals in big cities instead of clergymen in the transformation process shows the relationship between religion and Hungarian people (Palonen, 2009).



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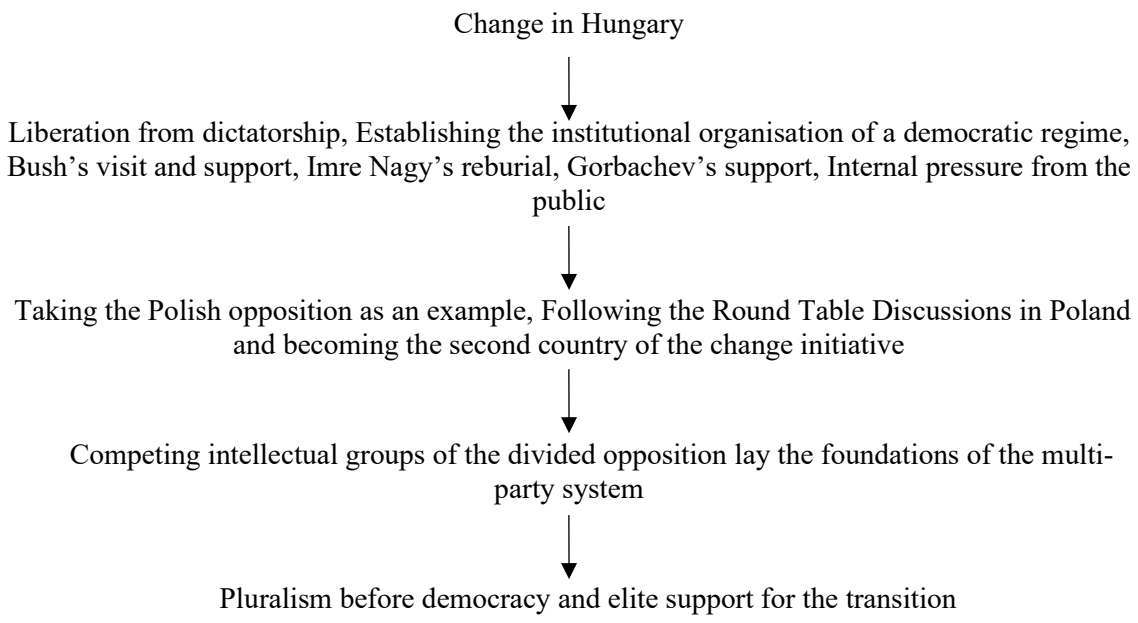

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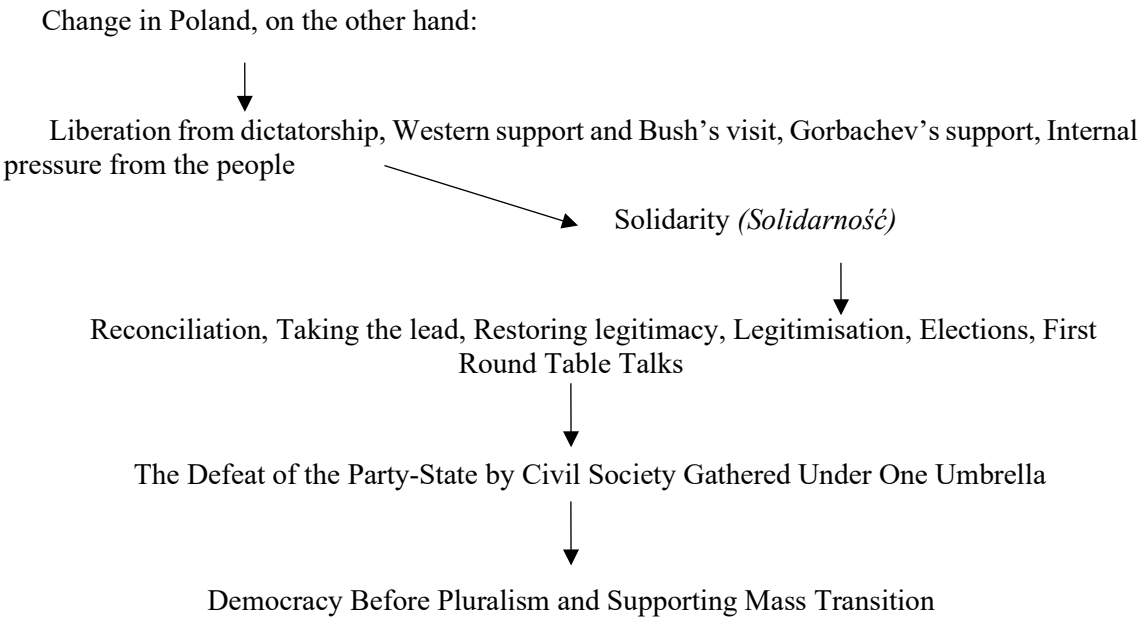

Figure 3 (Created by the author)

After 1988, political structures established by opposition movements, notably Fidesz, MDF, SZDSZ[8], FKgP, and KDNP, began organising demonstrations against the MSZMP (Valaczka, 2002: 104). The political pressure exerted by these opposition groups destabilised the Hungarian People's Republic and led to the dismissal of János Kádár, who was replaced by Károly Grósz. Grósz, a more reformist and liberal figure than Kádár, implemented significant reforms that profoundly impacted the Hungarian People's Republic and the MSZMP[9] (Judt, 2006: 608-610).

[8] Until the summer of 1989, SZDSZ did not have much opportunity to build a social base, and although the Free Initiatives Network *(Szabad Kezdeményezések Hálózata, SZKH)* attracted many citizens to the party, this effect lasted only for a year. In particular, the party found support from liberal circles in Hungary and allied itself with the Liga Trade Union *(Független Szakszervezetek Demokratikus Ligája)*. SZDSZ played a key role during the Round Table negotiations under the leadership of Péter Tölgyessy and established public relations with Fidesz throughout the negotiations.

[9] Grósz introduced many reforms during his presidency. The first important reform was the authorisation of new parties in 1988. Other decisions were made at the 14th Congress of the MSZMP in October 1989. Some of the decisions taken in October 1989 were the removal of the word *'worker'* from the Hungarian Socialist Labour Party (the name of the party was changed to Hungarian Socialist Party *(Magyar Szocialista Párt, MSZP))*, application for membership to the Socialist International, transition to a multi-party parliamentary system, transition to a free market economy. In addition, former party leaders sought to pioneer private entrepreneurship and promote welfare state ideas. Other key changes included transferring

Hungary's transition to democracy and restructuring was characterised by a process of *'contract/negotiation'* and *'elite agreement'*. Through negotiations between the government and the opposition, crucial decisions were made by the end of 1989. Among the most significant achievements were the establishment of a unicameral parliament, the adoption of a multi-party system, and the expansion of human rights and freedoms. These changes were accompanied by strengthened freedom of expression, acceptance of a free market economy, and democratic reforms supported by legal liberalisation (Armaoğlu, 2020: 688; Tökes, 1996). While 94 amendments were made to the 1949 Constitution following these negotiations, a completely new constitution was not established. In 1990, after the diminishing Soviet influence, a democratic and independent Hungary emerged, marking the establishment of the Third Hungarian Republic. The first multi-party democratic elections were held, and Hungary transitioned to a modern parliamentary system. Three key factors contributed to the success of this regime change in Hungary. The first was the rapprochement between the reformers within the MSZMP and the Hungarian opposition. The second factor was the success of the moderate opposition, represented by the MDF, in neutralising the ultra-moderates and guiding them towards change, a goal that was supported by the self-limiting radicals of the SZDSZ. In essence, this factor involved the reorganisation of the political playing field and the establishment of cooperation between radicals and moderates. The third factor was the success of the radicals in the referendum, which prevented the moderate opposition from reaching a premature power-sharing agreement with the dominant factions of the old regime, akin to the early Polish model. The combined effect of these factors was that the Round Table talks left few *'political landmines'* for the electorate to navigate in the new democratic era. However, this transformation did not come without challenges. The opposition was internally divided, and some negotiations between the opposition and the communist government reached a deadlock, necessitating a referendum to break the impasse. During the Round Table talks, opposition groups exhibited the following behaviours:

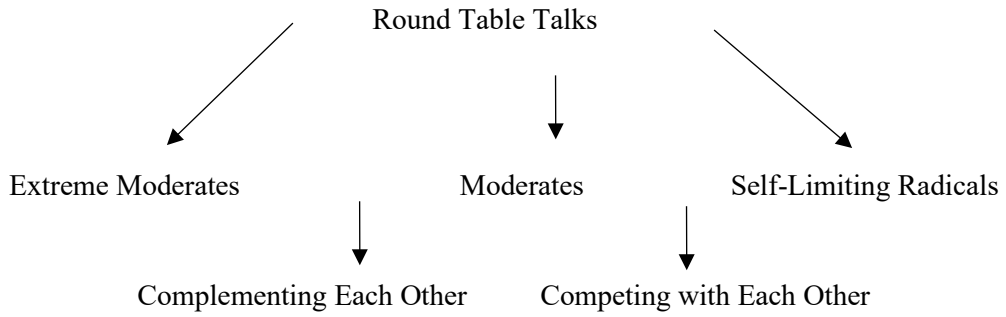

Figure 4 (Created by the author)

Hungarian intellectuals, particularly those organised under the umbrella of the MDF, emphasised national independence, the conditions necessary for a successful transition to democracy, and a focus on welfare policies. These priorities highlighted key issues centred on Hungarian national culture. During this period, the Hungarian opposition effectively blended nationalism with moral values and traditionalism, which significantly broadened its appeal and helped garner more

party property to the state, abolishing the workers' militia, prohibiting politics in factories, and renaming the Hungarian People's Republic as the Republic of Hungary (Barany, 1992: 450-453; Völgyes, 1990: 232).

outstanding mass support. This strategic combination resonated deeply with the public and bolstered the opposition's popular base. Meanwhile, the shifting political objectives—ranging from *'reform'* to *'model change'* to *'regime change'*—were mirrored by the behaviour of the Hungarian elites, characterised by phases of *'co-optation'*, *'co-operation'*, and *'elite-level struggle'*. Throughout this time, from 1987 to 1990, the various factions within the opposition, the definition of political change in Hungary, and the overall *'bumpy transition'* were in a constant state of flux. Specifically:

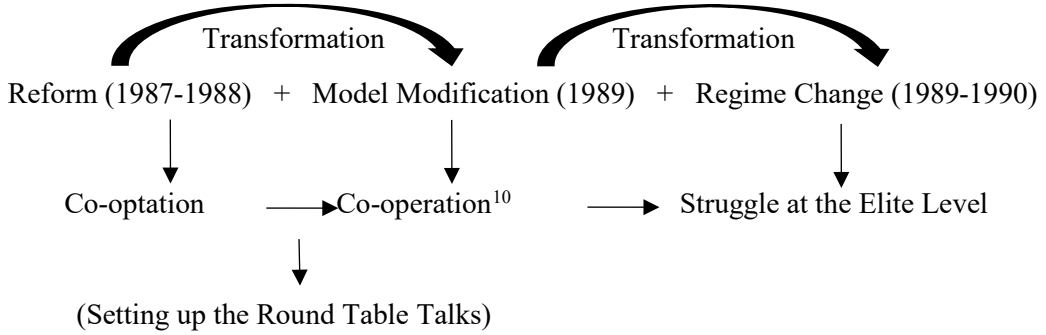

Figure 5 (Created by the author)

At this point, for a clearer understanding of the democratic transformation in Hungary, it is extremely important to analyse the dynamics of *the 'Round Table Talks'*, which were part of the bargaining process between the outgoing and incoming political elites and formed the basis for the revolutionary change.

The Round Table talks, the cornerstone of Hungary's negotiated revolution, emerged as a unique form of bargaining between the government and society. The significance of these discussions lay in the regime's acceptance of an open confrontation with the Hungarian opposition, effectively relinquishing its claim to represent the interests of Hungarian society. The Hungarian opposition, organised to compete with the regime, aimed to expose the regime's flaws, break away from the notion of negotiations and party-state reform, and instead focus on society. Their goals included revealing the relationship between legitimacy and legality, aligning radical reforms with opposition organisations, and presenting a democratic alternative. Additionally, the opposition sought to establish a social base for peaceful and democratic change, declare the regime illegitimate, prioritise the rule of law over *'revolutionary justice'*, and demonstrate the possibility of transitioning to a legitimate system within the framework of the law and constitution. However, these ambitious aims, which characterised the Round Table discussions, introduced new challenges to political thought concerning revolutions, particularly regarding the initiation of democracy. To overcome these challenges, the Hungarian opposition needed the support of the

[10] With the establishment of the Round Table in March 1989 and the opposition gaining strength during negotiations, the party failed to attract opposition reformers. Realizing that negotiations were the only way to achieve radical political change, the co-optation scenario was abandoned in favor of cooperation. The most important reason for this was undoubtedly the unification of the Hungarian opposition under *the 'principle of compromise'* and the creation of the Opposition Round Table *(Ellenzéki Kerekasztal, EKA)* (Shields, 2013; Hockenos, 2007). The strategy of cooperation organised by the MSZMP and representatives of the moderate wing of the opposition made it extremely difficult for the radical opposition parties to build an effective network, as the radical opposition wanted to be the creators of change, not its followers.

Hungarian people, which was decisively demonstrated on 15 March 1989. The success of the 15 March demonstrations had profound political implications for the MSZMP and the opposition. Following Poszgay's statements regarding 1956, the dissolution of the MSZMP accelerated; reformist circles emerged within the party, and hardline leaders were gradually removed. These developments compelled the MSZMP to join forces with the newly formed Opposition Round Table *(Ellenzéki Kerekasztal, EKA)*[11] in April. The division between the party and the government weakened the MSZMP's negotiation strategy with opposition parties individually. Opposition leaders displayed remarkable resilience, and the political conditions for unified opposition cooperation were solidified following the 15 March demonstrations. At their first meeting, EKA allies agreed that only organisations committed to popular sovereignty, which rejected privileges or the monopoly of power and did not align with communist organisations, could be part of the EKA. Procedural decisions to ensure unanimity were also established (Antall, 1989). This consensus further strengthened solidarity among the opposition, ensured the continuity of the Round Table discussions, and reinforced consensus-based decision-making. By this time, the EKA had become a significant political force across the country, while the MSZMP weakened, with reformist movements emerging from within[12].

On 10 June 1989, the MSZMP and the EKA signed an agreement to open negotiations, acknowledging that legitimacy hinged on popular sovereignty, which could not be monopolised by political power. This paved the way for meaningful negotiations. The funeral of Imre Nagy on 16 June 1989 marked the most symbolically important event of the transition period. Another crucial realisation for the MSZMP was the potential for street resistance if force was employed. The Round Table talks proceeded smoothly, bolstered by the strong backing of the Hungarian populace for the opposition parties' demands. In other words, the Hungarian opposition could rely on the steadfast support of the Hungarian people. In other words:

[11] EKA was founded on 22 March 1989 in Budapest by eight organisations (Kukorelli, 1991). Previously, in February, representatives of the most important political forces in Poland (Solidarity, the Communist Party, the Catholic Church, trade unions and satellite parties) initiated the *'Polish Round Table'* talks. The Hungarian opposition believed that it was reasonable to follow this model despite the differences in the political situation between the two countries. However, the only question for the Hungarian opposition at this point was who would initiate the co-operation. This is where the Forum of Independent Lawyers *(Független Jogász Fórum, FJF)*, founded in November 1988 under the leadership of Imre Konya (Andor, 2000), stepped in and offered to organise the negotiations. This meant a new dimension to the opposition's political activities. In fact, an intellectual group took on the role of full-fledged legislators and constitution-makers in Hungary during the transition period (Howard, 1994: 5).

[12] These reformist movements invited MSZMP to give up its hegemonic power and to carry out its own reform. In this way, the MSZMP allowed intra-party factions, gave up control of the press and dissolved the Nomenklatura.

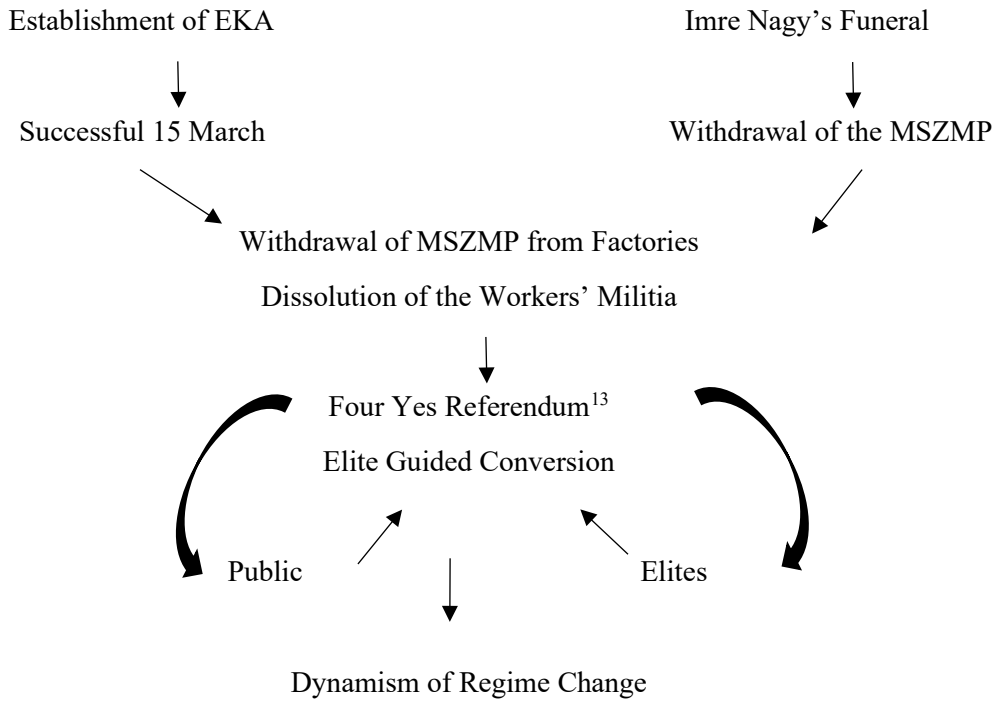

Figure 6 (Created by the author)

In this context, the structure of the Hungarian Round Table negotiations consisted of three negotiating partners. These are:

[13] After September 1989, those who believed that the unresolved issues of the negotiations were unclear argued that the democratic transition could not be guaranteed until the fundamental issues were resolved and proposed a referendum to decide on the open issues. The referendum was finally decided on 24 September, after a petition was launched and supported in particular by SZDSZ and its leader Péter Tölgyessy and Fidesz. The four questions asked to the Hungarian people in the referendum were:
1- Should MSZMP-related organisations be banned from entering the workplace?
2- Should the MSZMP account for the property it owns and manages?
3- Should the Labour Militia be dissolved?
4- Should the President be elected after the parliamentary elections? (Bozoki, 2022: 289).

Figure 7 (Created by the author)

As the political changes in Hungary intensified, in July, Károly Grósz's role as the leading figure in the MSZMP was replaced by a four-member party board[15]. This restructuring made Rezső Nyers the *'first among equals'* for a few months, driven by the concept of *'vertical diffusion of power'*. On 16 June, when the reformists within the MSZMP publicly supported the principle of free elections and a program for complete regime change, significant political advancements were made by the MDF and SZDSZ, while Fidesz gained increasing recognition. The focus shifted to holding by-elections, a referendum, and parliamentary elections, with the Hungarian people's attention fully directed toward the Round Table talks, which were now central to domestic political life. Unlike in Poland, where all political forces participated in a single Round Table, the Hungarian opposition parties established their own Round Tables to find a common platform for the transition. To counter the MSZMP's *'divide and rule'* strategy during these negotiations, the EKA emphasised the importance of bilateral negotiations with the MSZMP. Crucially, the EKA sought direct negotiations with the party that the constitution recognised as holding power through elections, advocating for face-to-face discussions between the two groups. As of the *'Memorandum of Understanding'* signed by the negotiating parties in Parliament on 13 June 1989, the structure of the negotiations was as follows:

[14] Under pressure from the opposition, the *'Law on Associations'* passed by the parliament in January 1989 legalised the existence of various political organisations (Kietlinska, 1992), and the adoption of the *'Partnership Law'* created the political environment necessary for the liberalisation of party formation and the transition to a multi-party system. Following these developments, Imre Pozsgay's supporters proposed a constituent assembly. This plan, which favoured the establishment of National Committees, was supported by both the group of elites close to the MSZMP and the New March Front *(Új Magyar Front, UMF)*, a reform group unofficially led by Rezső Nyers, but failed. Nyers also tried to establish links between reformist communists and social democrats (Ripp, 2002).

[15] The four members are Károly Grósz, Miklós Németh, Rezső Nyers and Imre Pozsgay.

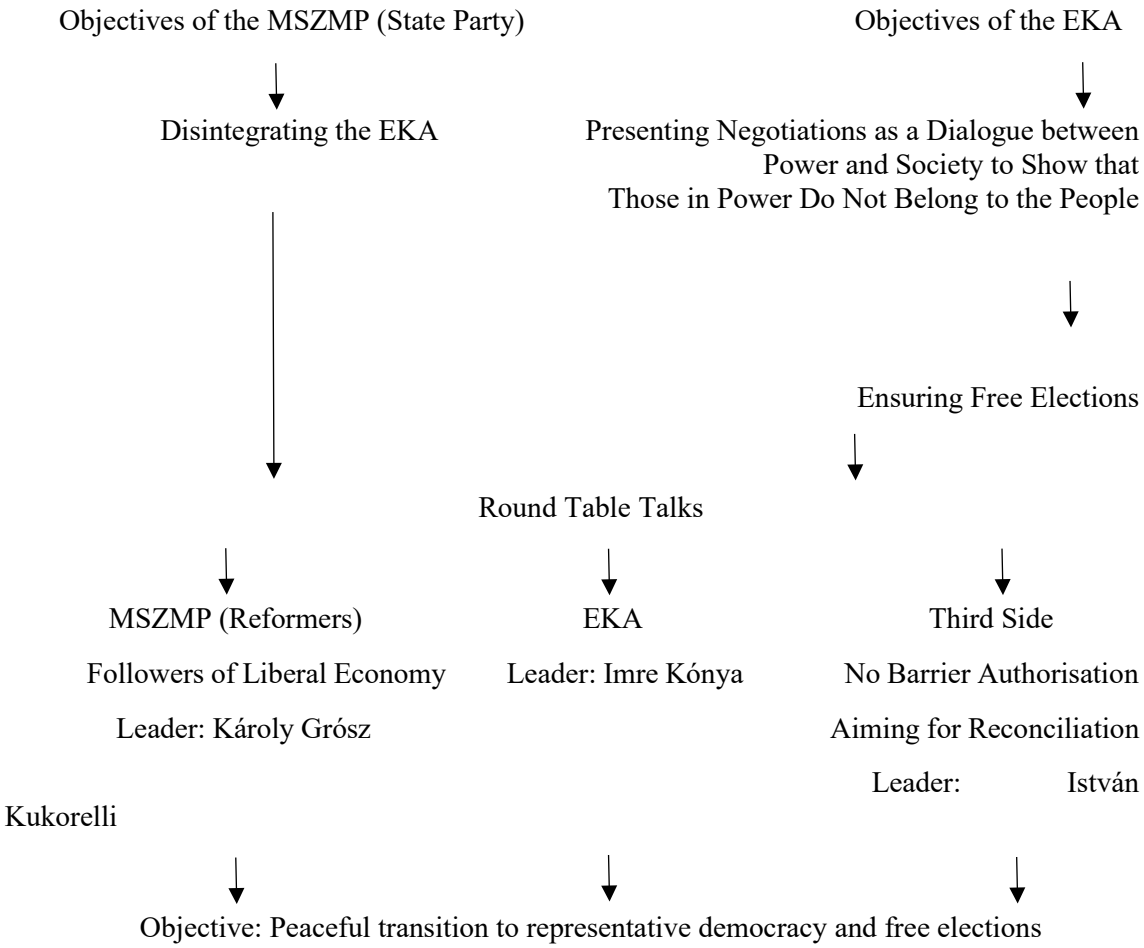

Figure 8 (Created by the author)

As a result, the old and new political groups endeavoured to realise Hungary's new constitutional system by assuming the functions of both the Hungarian Parliament and the constituent assembly. After the meeting on 4 September, the parties finally agreed on the formulation of the constitution and the duties of the President. However, a difference of opinion on whether the President should be elected by the people (supported by MSZMP and Third Party) or by the Parliament (supported by EKA) broke the unity of EKA in August 1989. The parties to this split within EKA were:

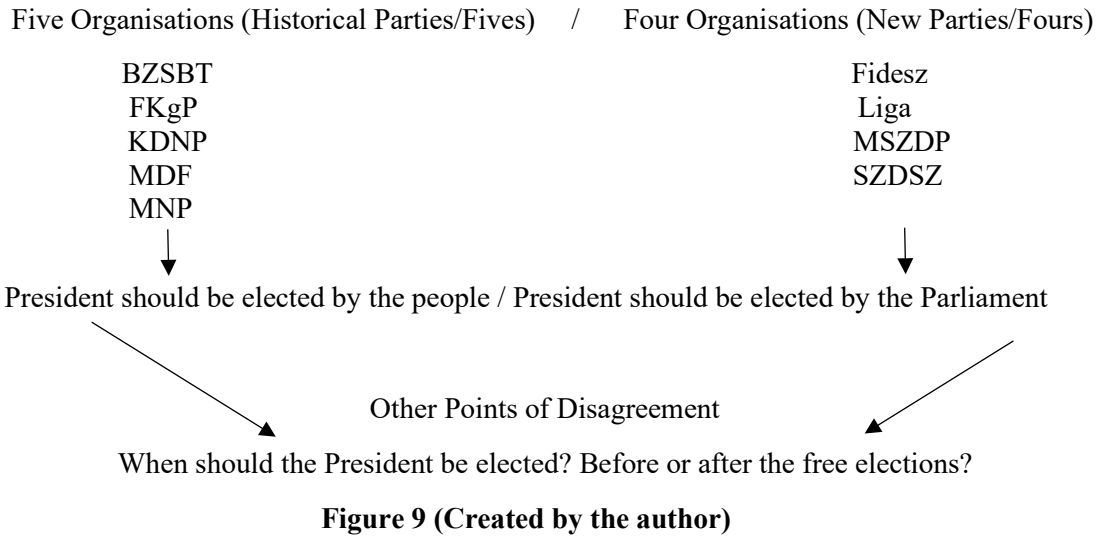

Figure 9 (Created by the author)

The differences between the historical parties and the new parties have often emerged as generational conflicts. These generational conflicts occurred between the older generation, socialised during the Horty era and between the two world wars, and the post-Second World War generation of the 56'ers and the 1968 generation. Opposition negotiators were also divided on tactical and strategic concerns. In other words, three types of perspectives can be distinguished within the opposition:

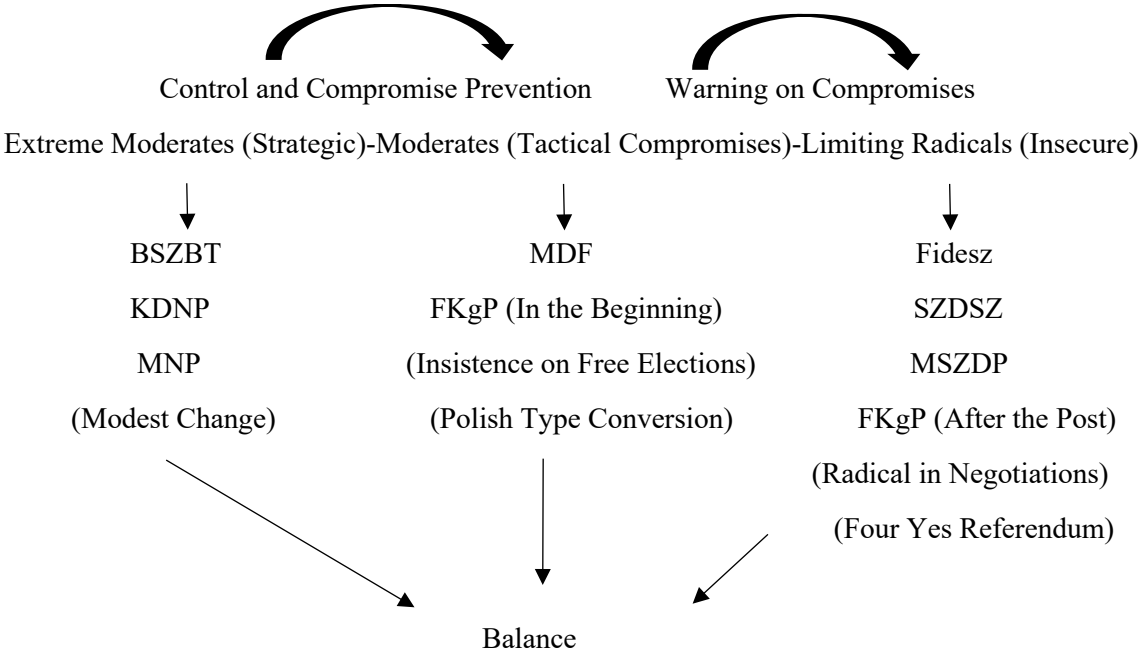

Figure 10 (Created by the author)

Emboldened by the internal disagreements within the EKA, the MSZMP initially rejected the EKA's proposal that the MSZMP should account for its wealth and use it to finance the newly formed parties to ensure equal opportunity. The MSZMP also refused the proposal to ban party organisations in workplaces (such as workers' militias), leading to a breakdown in the talks. Despite the breakdown, the unity of the EKA persisted until the plenary session on 18 September 1989. However, the SZDSZ and Fidesz opposed these negotiations, and the National Round Table negotiations concluded the negotiation phase of Hungary's democratic transition. Following the submission of the negotiated agreement to the Hungarian Parliament, a series of basic laws were adopted, culminating in comprehensive constitutional reforms in October 1989. As a result, the parliament voted to establish the constitutional framework of a democratic parliamentary republic, replacing the People's Republic. New regulations were enacted concerning the functioning of political parties and the election of representatives, the Presidential Council was abolished, and decisions were made regarding the commemoration of the 1956 People's Uprising. Furthermore, Hungary has declared an independent democratic constitutional state, embodying the values of both civil democracy and democratic socialism. With the adoption of the new constitution, the party-state was legally brought to an end, social fears began to dissipate, and the final mobilising anti-communist phase of the democratic transition began.

At this point, differing approaches to economic transformation emerged: the liberal Fidesz faction advocated for a radical transition, while the MDF supported a more balanced economic approach. However, the failure to address issues related to property ownership, the role of large capitalists and entrepreneurs, and foreign capital ultimately hindered the success of the economic transition.

In fact, significant negotiations on economic transition issues only took place in 1990, initiated by the Blue-Ribbon Commission *(Kék Szalag Bizottság)* and the Bridge Group *(HID-Csoport)* (Lengyel, 1989).

The liberal political philosophies of SZDSZ and Fidesz, which focused on the future, were primarily disconnected from references to Hungarian history and lacked a unified narrative. It was the conservative MDF, emerging from a group of populist writers, that succeeded in constructing such a narrative. The MDF, which sees itself as the intellectual heir to the populist writers and was founded in September 1987, had a broader membership and more widespread support. In contrast, the SZDSZ emerged from the 1980s democratic opposition, embodying Western-oriented, radical, liberal, and social democratic ideals. Its approach to Hungary's modernisation dilemmas significantly differed from traditional perspectives in the country's political culture. The populist MDF argued that Hungary's societal issues required the development of an original Hungarian style, building on the nation's existing characteristics. Meanwhile, the SZDSZ, composed primarily of urban groups, advocated for the adoption of modern, liberal democratic models developed in the West. However, during the transition period, both groups were united against a common enemy, which led them to become tactical allies, if not strategic ones. The willingness of the two strongest opposition factions to negotiate in 1989, and their agreement not only on tactical but also on strategic issues, was crucial for the birth of Hungarian democracy. The Round Table provided the only appropriate framework for jointly developing a strategy for a peaceful and democratic transition.

3. Transition to Democracy and Multi-Party System

MDF, the first party to bring cultural differences to the political forefront and successfully attract rural intellectuals, played a significant role in Hungary's transition to democracy. The softer rhetoric of Hungarian intellectuals within the MDF, compared to earlier Hungarian populists, indicated that this movement distanced itself from radical ideologies. This, combined with its cooperation with mainstream right-wing movements, increased public trust in the MDF and Hungarian populists. As a result, the MDF, which garnered widespread public support during the transition to democracy, evolved into a political party after Hungary's shift to liberal democracy and became the ruling party following the 25 March 1990 elections. In Hungary, where socialist, nationalist, conservative, and liberal mainstream parties invigorated political life after the transition, the MDF won the first multi-party election in 1990, securing 165 parliamentary seats with 24.73% of the vote[16]. MSZP, the successor to the long-ruling communist party[17], won 33 seats with 10.89% of the vote. These results marked the end of the MSZMP's

[16] With the elections held in 1990, the one-party regime which had lasted for forty years in Hungary came to an end (Visegrady, 1992: 246-248). At the end of the elections, Antall, who undertook the task of forming the new government, decided to form a coalition government with the centre-right parties, FKgP and KDNP, and the opposition consisted of SZDSZ, MSZP and Fidesz.

[17] Following the democratisation moves, the delegates gathered decided to transform MSZMP into a new party, MSZP, compromising its communist stance and ideology and dissolving itself. This transformation made the MSZMP the first party among the communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe to take this decision. Despite this transformation, the MSZP continued to see itself as the *'legal successor'* to the

dominance, which had ruled Hungary since 1947, and led to the formation of an anti-communist, intellectual-centred, and liberal government under József Antall's leadership. After its electoral victory, the MDF accelerated Hungary's transition to capitalism and began implementing economic and political reforms[18;19] (Csillag, 1995: 97). However, the failure of these reforms and financial policies, coupled with rising unemployment, inflation, and poverty, ironically shifted Hungarian voters' support to the MSZP in the 1994 elections. The MSZP, winning 32.99% of the vote, formed a coalition with SZDSZ, continuing Hungary's transition to capitalism.

Despite the socialist-liberal government's efforts, its failure to fully meet the Hungarian people's expectations, the sale of national assets to foreign companies during Hungary's opening to the outside world, and corruption during the privatisation process eroded public confidence in the capitalist model and the socialist government. This disillusionment led to Fidesz's rise to power in 1998. Understanding the period between 1998 and 2002, the first Orbán era is crucial for grasping the populist dynamics in contemporary Hungary. After the elections, Fidesz formed a coalition with the FKgP, representing the lower-middle class adversely affected by Hungary's capitalist transformation. The political landscape that emerged in Hungary after the 1998 elections reflected a situation where those disadvantaged by the capitalist transition remained committed to liberal democracy and Westernization but were critical of the transition's shortcomings. This period was also foundational for the populist discourse and policies of Viktor Orbán and Fidesz. During this time, Fidesz began to develop confrontational policies aimed at creating a *'new right-populist base'* by polarising society and politics (Bozoki, 2008: 198-215). Orbán sought to establish two opposing forces vying for political power and pursued a *'second revolution'* strategy, emphasising Hungarian cultural unity. He aimed to create a new political elite capable of challenging the leftist elites. The Fidesz government faced criticism for favouring certain groups, lacking transparency in public tenders, and labelling its supporters as 'good Hungarians'. These issues ultimately contributed to Fidesz's defeat in the 2002 elections.

Until the mid-2000s, Hungary was one of the pioneers of the democratisation movement in the region, successfully joining the EU in 2004 and becoming a country where democracy was

fortune of the state party. However, this created an undemocratic atmosphere, and the party realised that it would lose the elections.

[18] Following the elections, Hungary transitioned to post-communism through 1990. During this period, the Hungarian people did not feel the need to take to the streets end masse for change. Therefore, the post-communist revolution in Hungary is described as *'melancholic'* (Simon, 1993) or *'revolution by negotiation'* (Bruszt, 1990).

[19] A little over a year after the establishment of the first democratic government, a pro-democracy movement appeared on the Hungarian political scene, which led to the rise of a new group of activists, the *'movement intellectuals'*. This initiative reflects the frustrations of liberal intellectuals with the performance of the conservative Antall government and with post-transition politics in general. The representatives of the Democratic Charter *(Demokratikus Charta, DC)* movement (Bozoki, 1996: 173), launched in the autumn of 1991, feared a takeover of the government by the radical right and wanted to preserve basic democratic values in order to keep the new Hungarian democracy alive. Although this movement aimed to take a universal democratic stance, it ultimately helped the left and liberal parties to come to power.

consolidated through a stable government system, a healthy electoral system, and an economic structure that attracted international capital (Magyar, 2016). However, over time—particularly after the 2008 economic crisis—crises, instability, disparities in living standards between urban and rural areas, and corruption allegations led to a rightward shift in Hungarian politics. Viktor Orbán, who positioned populism as the central strategy of Hungary's right-wing bloc, capitalised on these developments to return to power in 2010. This enabled Orbán to initiate a new era in Hungarian politics, characterised by anti-elitist, nationalist, and new right-wing populist governance. Indeed, in the 2010 and 2014 elections, the right-wing Fidesz-KDNP coalition and Jobbik secured 65-70% of the vote. This shift indicated that Hungary was evolving from a multi-party system to a two-party system (Agh, 2016; Lewis and Mansfeldova, 2007: 64; Kovarek and Soos, 2016). The entry of the formerly radical right-wing Jobbik into the Hungarian Parliament, coupled with Fidesz's political practices and Jobbik's rhetoric, steered Hungary's political direction towards the radical right. Since this period, Hungarian populism, characterised by anti-liberal democracy, anti-EU, anti-communist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and Islamophobic policies framed within an *'us versus them'* narrative, has maintained a strong influence in Hungary.

Conclusion

Hungary's transition from communism to democracy is a defining moment in the history of Central and Eastern Europe, characterised by a peaceful shift from authoritarian rule to a multi-party democratic system. This transformation was the result of a complex interplay of internal and external factors, including economic crises, the weakening of Soviet influence, and the strategic actions of opposition movements. The process began with Hungary's gradual liberalisation in the 1980s, which set the stage for broader political reforms. Key events such as the Round Table talks, which provided a platform for negotiations between the communist regime and opposition groups, were instrumental in ensuring a smooth transition. The Round Table talks, coupled with the support of civil society and the international community, facilitated Hungary's first free elections in 1990 and the establishment of the Third Hungarian Republic. However, the post-transition period was not without its challenges. The economic reforms initiated by the MDF government under József Antall faced significant obstacles, leading to economic hardships that shifted public support towards the MSZP in the mid-1990s. The fluctuating political landscape of the 1990s and early 2000s, marked by the rise of Viktor Orbán and the populist Fidesz party, reflects the ongoing struggles to balance democratic ideals with the realities of economic transformation and political power.

Orbán's first term in office (1998-2002) laid the groundwork for the populist policies that would later dominate Hungarian politics. His return to power in 2010 marked the beginning of a new era, characterised by a shift towards a more polarised and right-wing political environment. The consolidation of power by Fidesz and the rise of Jobbik have steered Hungary towards a political system increasingly dominated by right-wing populism, challenging the principles of liberal democracy. In conclusion, Hungary's journey from communism to democracy is a testament to the resilience of its people and the strategic vision of its leaders during the transition period. However, the evolution of Hungarian politics in the decades following the transition highlights the ongoing challenges of maintaining democratic values in the face of economic, social, and political pressures. As Hungary continues to navigate its path within the European Union and the broader international community, the lessons from its transition remain relevant for understanding the complexities of democratisation in post-authoritarian contexts.

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