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Foreword

for Diagnosis: Studies on the Hungarian situation

(Budapest, 2017)

It was in the autumn of 2010 that I started writing the first essay in this volume, 'Taking Stock', with the intention of publishing it as soon as possible in a daily paper, *Népszabadság*, which has since been liquidated. At that point the main messages in the essay had already long taken shape in me. Much earlier, I had sided with Schumpeter and his followers in the debate over the essential features of democracy, sharing their view that the main difference between democracy and other political forms lies in the fact that any government in power is *dismissible*. (Schumpeter, 1942/2010). There is no need for a conspiracy, a military coup, an uprising or a terrorist act, nor for bloody rebellion or civil war. There is a peaceful and civilized procedure for the dismissal of a government: a general election. The winner takes over the responsibilities of government, while the loser acknowledges defeat and wishes the winner success in governing.

Fifteen years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall I gave a lecture on the successes and failures of the change of regime (Kornai, 2005): what I considered to be the most important success was that democracy finally seemed to have taken root in Central and Eastern Europe too, in this region which had suffered so much. To prove this, I summarized in a table in which countries, how many times a change of government had already taken place in a peaceful manner, following a civilized procedure. Hungary was there in the table. Whichever group of parties won, the losers (including the first Fidesz government) acknowledged the result. I started to become worried when, following the elections in 2002, the losing side refused to accept defeat. Its new slogan was: 'The fatherland cannot be in opposition!' Worry turned to crushing anxiety when Viktor Orbán, that iron-willed politician, declared in his memorable speech at Kötcse (Orbán 2009, pp 4-5) that he intended to establish a regime which would be able to hold on to power for 15-20 years. I found I could not put myself at ease by dismissing this as mere electoral chest-thumping.

The new government did not waste a single day after winning the 2010 election, which ensured it a two-thirds majority in parliament. Immediately, without delay, it set about weakening, or rather abolishing, the system of checks and balances. It was all too easy to collect reports of the sinister first measures which supported the claims I made in the essay. Careful analysis made it perfectly clear, at least to me, that the trouble had started: in Hungary, first among the countries of Eastern-Central Europe that had been liberated from the previous dictatorship, the establishment of an autocracy had begun as a result of a whole series of determined measures.

A sort of clinical report had to be compiled, like the one written by the doctor examining a gravely injured patient. The injury was not caused by any natural disaster, nor by an accident; it was caused by the premeditated actions of certain people. A clinical report must say if the injury will heal within eight days. The doctor can state without hesitation if the injury will not heal for an extended period, and will cause permanent damage. Let us move from this hypothetical example borrowed from the world of medicine to a real process: in

history there are temporary changes, fluctuations, vacillations. If for a while things get rough, the healthy body of society will recover. Unfortunately, however, from time to time irreversible damage is done. This is what has happened with our country. Even if the autocratic regime comes to an end at some point, the processes that started in 2010 have caused dire destruction and loss, of historic proportions.

What is the point of raising the alarm early? The objective reader may check: the worries expressed in these essays have been vindicated one by one. A year after the publication of 'Taking Stock' I wrote a paper entitled 'Centralization and Capitalist Market Economy'. It illustrated the strength of the tendency to centralize, using almost three dozen examples. It foreboded the continuation of the tendency. However, the signs of danger identified in that essay six years ago went unheeded. Only much later did the protests begin. Since then, hardly a month has gone by without news of newer and newer examples of centralization. The press has reported only recently how the head teachers of this or that secondary school are appointed 'from above' (Magyar Narancs, 2017) It seems almost impossible, yet this is precisely what is happening: a selection process which should be conducted with respect for the autonomy of teachers, of the local council, of the parents and of the students, to appoint the leaders of several thousand secondary schools in the country, has been taken over by a bureaucratic center.

What is the point of raising the alarm early? In the scientific world it is considered creditable to be first to recognize an important phenomenon. Right now I do not feel the pleasure of being the first, or one of the first. Not only do I not feel proud, but it embitters me to see how my predictions have come true, how the patterns revealed in my essays have really prevailed.

What is the point of raising the alarm early? It seems that those who should pay attention do not even hear it. They only notice problems when it is too late, when many others have already grasped that the partial changes have merged into a coherent system; when the new institutions have been firmly implanted; when those in power have dismissed the officials who made their way into higher positions on the usual career ladder, and put their own people in their places. Dismissibility, this fundamental issue of democracy, has become part of popular discourse, albeit in a reduced form, devoid of its real significance, with its interpretation narrowed down to the question of whether the Fidesz government can be removed in 2018. Rather, the emphasis should be on what kind of institutional system is able to guarantee the dismissibility of any government in power. As the battle of words rages over the approaching elections, newer and newer layers are added to the cement that keeps Fidesz in power.

How many years did it take for the European institutions that safeguard the maintenance of the democratic order to notice that the Hungarian government had taken the wrong path; that it had turned away from democracy and European values? How long it took them to understand that it is not enough to criticize a single paragraph of law, taking it out of the context of the institutional environment, of the system in its entirety, because this can only be understood in the whole context of the system! They are beginning to sense it only now, when Poland, a much bigger country which is far more significant in geopolitical, military and economic terms, has taken the same path.

Some of the essays in this volume have been published in scientific journals, where they were provided with all the normal apparatus of academic publications: footnotes, tables, graphs, citations and bibliographies. Others have reached the public via forums where it is not

usual to write footnotes or to indicate precisely the sources of data and ideas taken from others, although these papers too were preceded by research work, data collection, and careful study of the relevant literature. It is possible that there has been a reader, maybe more than one, who is interested in the topic, but declines to read longer essays. I realize that in the age of text messages, short e-mails, soundbites, witty, concise answers given to TV interviewers not everybody has the patience to read a lengthy treatise. But even if this genre is outdated, passé, I stick to it. I am convinced that we do not only need overall clinical reports, but numerous diagnoses as well, based on thorough and detailed examination. I trust that there are and will be – if not masses, at least a reasonable number of – readers who are prepared to make the effort to read analytical essays which look at difficult issues from several points of view. People who agree with the main thrust of the essays in this volume to start with, but are glad of some help in organizing their own ideas. And a growing number of people who at the beginning were put off by the sharpness of my words, but have been convinced by experience that those words hit the target. After the publication of ‘Taking Stock’ I had a long debate with a very bright, open-minded disciple of mine, and we could not convince each other. Recently I received a letter from him, in which he wrote: ‘...you were completely right.’

Many people reproached me for my publications since 2010, which – as they predict the very likely continuation of the current regime – demoralize those who would resist the tyrannical system. I do not accept this criticism. There may be people who only like to join the winners, but luckily not everyone is like that. It is possible to fight for a losing cause, if we genuinely and deeply believe in the ideas we stand for. What is more, I have never claimed to be able to say anything certain about the future, nor do I do so now. I am not one of those who consider themselves self-confident prophets. If we look at the great historical watersheds, there are many examples that show that contemporaries did not, and could not, foresee which unique constellation of factors would bring about dramatic changes; at what point in time and as a result of which causes the dramatic earthquake would take place, bringing down tyranny.

Others have complained that in my essays I do not say what is to be done. I do not say, because I myself do not know. I interpret these criticisms to mean that the analytical researcher is expected to give practical advice to the forces struggling to change the government in power, to tell them how to achieve victory. However, this is a very different profession from the one I have been practicing for decades. I learnt the hard way from the few occasions when I actively tried to give advice to politicians; they only ever did what I advised if they would have done it anyway, without me. And in spite of all rational argument they turned a deaf ear to any recommendation that did not suit their intentions. Besides, even if the politician was inclined to follow my advice, there is no guarantee that he or she would have had the support of the masses. Political counseling is not a science – it is a very different profession, with different perspectives and ethics from those that characterize us, researchers. The goals are given, and they are not chosen by the advisors, but by their employer, the political leader or party acting in government or in opposition; the advisors help to find the right instruments. They make their choices not according to what is cleanest, but what is most efficient. The guiding principle is “victory comes first, scruples second.” I know there is a market for this profession, but I do not have the talent for it, and even if I were to try my hand at it, I would suffer from permanent moral conflicts. As citizens, the artist, the teacher, the businessman and the scientific researcher may speak out – indeed, they must! But as incompetent, amateur political advisors it is best for them to remain silent.

When I was writing the essays in this volume, I found it important to keep an objective tone. But I must confess it was difficult to hold myself back, such were my feelings of despair

and anger. I am not only angry with those who do evil, but also with those who tolerate evil, who keep quiet and lie low.

Péter Nádas wrote a review of my autobiography, entitled: ‘KORNAL, in the Spirit of Independence and Patriotism’ (Nádas, 2005). Yes, I claimed to be a patriot when Hungary, in spite of the many problems and distasteful developments, was in the ascendant, and I still claim to be a patriot now, when I fear for our country, when I sense, with anger, how we are sliding downhill.

In social sciences, issues without any political charge do get investigated. There are excellent works dealing with the application of mathematical statistics in the fields of economics, sociology and political science: querying on the basis of which criteria one of the variables in the model can be deemed significant, how robust the conclusions drawn from the calculations are, and so on. Whoever reads articles or books of this type can take a stand on the question of whether the statements in the text are true or false, without any political bias. However, scholars in the social sciences are usually keener on problems which are neither politically neutral, nor free of values. Without doubt, the essays in this volume belong to the latter category. The temptations of partiality cannot be resisted by stylistic means, by the use of a calm, objective tone, because this is a problem of *content*. Thus I strive to separate – as far as I can – *positive, objective description* from evaluation. The only question one can raise against the former is whether the description is truthful. If it is not, then the critic must refute it. The essays published here are full of such descriptions. I have not read or heard of any critiques which refute them.

I have a system of values, and I make no secret of it. In my hierarchy of values, democracy, and the defense and further extension of human rights, rank highest.

This value system did not take shape inside me very recently: it was formed long ago. Let me quote from a lecture which I gave reflecting on the experience I had gained in the first years of the period of the change of regime, twenty-five years ago.

“In the post-socialist region, the following view has been expressed, and not only once (albeit not in print, but in confidential circles): it would definitely be a good thing for the transition from the socialist system to a capitalist market economy to be conducted by an autocratic political regime. Transition is accompanied by anarchy, thus we need “law and order”, which can only be guaranteed by a firm government [...] I do not wish to deny that this train of thought contains rational elements. There may be, especially at a time of great social transformation on a revolutionary scale, a kind of trade-off between the rate of growth and the fulfillment of democracy [...] Let me make a personal confession here. If I was forced to make such a choice, I would rather stick to democracy, and not only to all that has been achieved so far in that area, but to its further development as well – even if we have to pay the price of more modest economic results.” (Kornai, 1992, pp 10-11)

The essays published in the volume each reflect the state of affairs when they were written: they relate to the period which inspired their message. If we now read the six texts one after the other, the *dynamics* of the process become clearer: what was tangible already from the beginning, and what emerged gradually, sometimes on the basis of the pre-meditated plans of the leader and his fellows, sometimes haphazardly, mostly rushing forward like a whirlwind, sometimes retreating. At the same time, the reader may notice that I tried to keep

pace with the course of events, and to improve, to make the methodology of analysis more accurate. I hope that even those readers who encountered the six essays earlier, when they were first published, will gain a lot more now that they can re-process their previous impressions, interlinked and connected to one another. It becomes more obvious that the later analyses are based on the earlier ones; the way in which Hungarian capitalist autocracy functions comes into ever-sharper focus. I hope the reader will also notice that I am prepared to correct myself in view of new experiences and debates; in later essays I present in more detail, with more precision, ideas I did not understand earlier, or could not see clearly on the basis of the available information, so that my earlier conclusions were mistaken.

The first essay of the volume was written at the end of 2010. Since then, many important events have taken place at home and abroad. I still follow developments. In spite of this, I do not venture to bring my previous writings up to date. Even if I took on such a task now, in the autumn of 2017, in a few years' time the reader would still only be holding an 'old' book. In some places I have inserted new footnotes, marked with asterisks – wherever I found it necessary to mention a recent development, or where my present opinion differs from an earlier one expounded in an essay. The additional footnotes are, however, exceptions from the rule I set for myself: the reader should see the original writings. (I will not burden the reader by pointing out minor stylistic changes made by myself or by the editor, or cases where a factual mistake was corrected.) I do trust that the majority of my statements will stand the test of time, and the methodology applied in the volume will be applicable to the examination of the systems of other countries and periods.

I cannot know how many readers this *Clinical Report* will have, and if they read it, how they will be affected by my writings. I am relieving my own conscience by launching this volume, in the belief that it will help with the struggle to reclaim democracy, a struggle that promises to be a long one.

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