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HUNGARY: ONE-TIME POSTER CHILD NOW UNDER CLOSER SCRUTINY

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The Hungarian government under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is currently the target of criticism from both Europe and Germany. The Greens have raised 40 questions in the German Bundestag pertaining to Hungarian politics and the current situation in the country. The European Commission has initiated deficit procedures against Hungary. The problem is principally to do with the budgetary consequences of the policies adopted by the previous Socialist government. The European Commission has made a projection of the country's potential budgetary deficit and, as a result, Hungary feels it is being pilloried by these procedures. It believes it is being unfairly treated compared to other countries, especially those of the former Eastern Bloc, and feels that different standards are clearly being applied.

Europe has "got it in" for Hungary. This is the growing feeling in the country, and not just amongst the ranks of the conservative government that has been in power for 20 months or the factions that support it. More than anything, they would like to see a little more support from their friends of the kind they received from the European People's Party faction at the last sitting of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, when Hungary was again on the agenda. Once again, the Hungarian Prime Minister had to face up to debates about his country, but he also made it clear that the Hungarian government was naturally quite prepared to take due note of any well-founded criticism by such bodies as the European Commission.

The growing and increasingly angry criticism on the part of the Hungarian left and their allies since the change of government should come as no great surprise; indeed it is almost a tradition. And, of course, since the change of government and the commencement of Viktor Orbán's second term in office, many of them have lost their sinecures. So this often hostile criticism and monitoring of Hungarian politics is spurred on by some very human and purely materialistic factors. Observers have been amazed at just how much the Orbán government underestimated the announcement by ousted opponents that they would fight the new conservative government and Viktor Orbán in particular with all the means at their disposal. The opposition threats were quite clear – it was a matter of international ostracism. Orbán himself is no stranger to courting controversy and this seems to be a deliberate ploy on his part. While such an approach may lay him open to attack, it is also one of the main reasons for his success. This was also the case during his first term as Prime Minister (1998-2002), which proved to be a very successful time for Hungary. He continued down this path during his subsequent stint as leader of the opposition, when he emerged as one of the main opponents of the international left. He has sometimes been compared to Haider, or to Berlusconi, or even to Putin, and it is this inconsistency and sheer variety that speaks volumes about the quality of the criticism levelled against him. Much of it was clearly planned by his opponents to act as a trial balloon, in the hope that some of it would stick in the minds of the public during their battle against Orbán.

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BRINGING HUNGARY'S INTERNAL SQUABBLES ONTO THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

Therefore, the new media law offered a very welcome opportunity to discredit Orbán as Hungary's new Prime Minister. The feeling in the European Parliament in Strasbourg was that this law presented an ideal opportunity to highlight the new government's limitations on an international stage. The law came under fire almost before it was presented in a readable draft form. It was a real blunder on the part of the new government to pass this law at the

very moment that it was taking over the Presidency of the EU, and it just succeeded in getting Hungary's Presidency off on the wrong foot.

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The European Parliament and the Socialist faction in particular led the attacks on the Hungarian election victors who had brought an end to the terms of the two previous socialist governments – a period that had proven to be a disaster for the country. The Socialists in the Hungarian Parliament, or at least what was left of them after the parliamentary elections, are currently not really in a position to form an effective opposition at parliamentary level and remain internally divided. The former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány recently quit the Socialist MSZP party. He became the focus of Europe-wide attention after his infamous lies speech in Balaton, where he accused himself, the MSZP and his own government of lying to Parliament and providing the European Commission with false and made-up facts and figures. He has now founded a new party and is also trying to form a multi-party alliance against the conservative government. This three-party alliance is made up of his own party, the MSZP and the LMP to form a new green-oriented party in Parliament.

The financial and economic interests supporting Gyurcsány are the same ones that stood by him during his term in government and who profited greatly during this time. They are continuing the systematic attacks against the Orbán government using their contacts and relationships within Europe, especially in Germany.

Within this web of criticism and agitation we should not underestimate the influence of those literary and artistic figures who are also well-known outside Hungary and often rarely or no longer live in the country itself. They are popular with editors, especially in Germany. They use the media as a platform to accuse the Fidesz-led government and are regularly allowed to air their views. The main question is just how much weight should be ascribed to their opinions.

It would have also been good to hear the condemnatory statements of these Hungarian creative artists during the Socialists' time in government, when the country was being led towards economic and financial ruin. Or during the October 2006 demonstrations against Gyurcsány, when opposition demonstrators were beaten up by masked policemen and forced back by mounted police. But even then, the critics were more interested in Viktor Orbán and the 'danger' presented by him possibly taking over the government. There was also no mention of measures being taken by the European Parliament in Strasbourg in light of the excessive use of violence by the police against peaceful demonstrators, and the German Bundestag showed no inclination to get involved.

DID ORBÁN'S LANDSLIDE CONTRIBUTE TO CURRENT HARDSHIPS?

The landslide victories enjoyed by Orbán and his party in the parliamentary elections and in the following local elections were inevitable, given the political reality of the situation in the country and the disastrous results of the Socialist government's policies. However, this "two-thirds victory" was, and still is, one of the key reasons behind the ongoing conflict in Hungarian politics and society, which clearly goes beyond mere rivalry.

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In the parliamentary elections of April 2010, the Fidesz-KDNP coalition that formed the government won 53 per cent of the vote. Under the existing electoral system, this gave them 68 per cent of the seats and a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian Parliament. The electorate had started to feel increasingly antagonistic towards the Socialist governments that had been in power for eight years since the riots of autumn 2006. The election victory was not just due to the conservative parties and what they had to offer. To a great extent it was payback from the voters who had been regularly disappointed by the Socialist parties and their leaders and who felt they had been conned. These ruling parties had been discredited all the way up to the top by a whole series of corruption scandals and evidence of government mismanagement. At the end of 2008, when Gyurcsány was Prime Minister, Hungary became the one of

the first European countries to apply for an IMF loan. The country was on the edge of bankruptcy and was no longer in a position to pay the pensions and salaries of its public sector employees.

The interim Socialist government under Gordon Bajnai (2009-2010) was able to introduce the most urgently-needed austerity measures once Gyurcsány had resigned. These measures formed part of the conditions for receiving a 21 billion euro loan from the IMF. However, there were no new elections, even though the majority of the country's population had been calling for them since 2006. When people were finally allowed to vote in 2010, they delivered a landslide victory to the Fidesz-KDNP coalition.

THE DIFFICULT REBUILDING OF THE COUNTRY AND ITS STRUCTURES – VISION AND MISSION

When it took over the reins of power, the new government not only tried to do everything better, but also to do everything differently. It probably tried to do too much all at once. Orbán likes to talk about the pressing need to rebuild the country, and his statements during the election campaign and the obvious support of the voters have given the impression that he feels he has a clear mandate to do whatever is necessary. In the run-up to the election, the current ruling parties did indeed base their campaign around this need and promised a complete restructuring of the country. The Prime Minister is, in fact, right when he says that, following the collapse of communism, many necessary steps towards change had not actually taken place in Hungary, or had only been carried out half-heartedly.

It is ironic that, in Hungary of all places, a government bent on reform towards the end of the communist era, as represented by the reformers Imre Pozsgay and Miklós Németh, considered certain fundamental changes after the collapse of communism either to be unnecessary or failed to even recognise them at all. In this respect, it is easy to understand Orbán's claim that the

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are therefore still on the agenda today. What is less easy for outsiders to understand is Orbán's use of the word "revolution" to describe the situation that arose from the incomplete changes following the collapse of communism. It is certainly true that this Prime Minister not only has a new vision, but also a mission, as he has stated very clearly.

The voters obviously liked this and voted for him accordingly. The election results were based on free and fair elections. When a two-thirds majority looked likely between the two rounds of voting (in Hungary there are two rounds of voting in parliamentary elections) the new slogan became: "Small majority – small changes. Big majority – big changes."

The people of Hungary voted for the large majority of the Fidesz-KDNP coalition in the full knowledge of what they were doing – perhaps with unrealistic hopes that the economic situation would improve.

The people of Hungary therefore voted for this large majority quite deliberately and in the full knowledge of what they were doing. Perhaps they had unrealistic hopes that things would change quickly and that the economic situation would improve, for them personally as well as for the country. Bearing in mind the terrible state the country was in, during the election campaign Orbán kept repeating the mantra that one term in office would not be enough to put the country back on an orderly and sound footing.

THE NEW CONSTITUTION ATTRACTS STRONG CRITICISM

The criticism of the new constitution both at home and abroad was sparked off by the fact that there was to be a new constitution in the first place. Many international observers felt it was unnecessary, as the Hungarian Constitution of 1949, which still bore the date given by the Communists, had been totally re-worked and was now a democratic constitution. While this was true, for years it had been the intention of every Hungarian government to create a new constitution and so erase all references to 1949. But in the past there had never been the necessary majority or the real concrete willingness to adopt a new constitution in Parliament. All former Eastern Bloc countries, apart from Latvia, had introduced new constitutions following the collapse of communism. And Latvia's constitution, written in 1922, was undeniably democratic in nature. There was no need for them to change it.

In Hungary's current political climate it was not possible to get all the parties to work together on a new constitution. The different goals and strategies amongst the parties proved to be too much of an obstacle. On 18 April 2011 the new constitution, the "Basic Law of Hungary", was passed by Parliament. It came into force on 1 January 2012. The official ceremony at the State Opera House was accompanied by a large demonstration against the constitution and against Orbán's government itself.

The new Basic Law of Hungary is in fact highly contemporary and cannot really be objected to in terms of democratic principles or the constitutional rule of law.

Critics claim that the new Basic Law undermines the democratic rule of law, and effectively abolishes the Republic. They see it as a backward step and believe it opens the door

to authoritarian rule. However, in the cold light of day, we find a text that is in fact highly contemporary and cannot really be objected to in terms of democratic principles or the constitutional rule of law. It is a modern constitution that enshrines the basic rights included in the EU Charter and the principle of sustainability, as well as providing for a brake on national debt. Necessary changes have been introduced in terms of the priorities enshrined in a modern constitution. There are clear parallels with the Basic Law of Germany.

In the absence of any really concrete points to argue with, the initial criticism was focused on the language and diction of the constitution or on minor issues, including the preamble, which is entitled "God bless the Hungarians!", from the first line of the country's national anthem.

NO QUESTION OF "ABOLISHING THE CONSTITUTION"

The accusation that the new constitution somehow effectively abolishes the Republic is simply false and misleading. What is true is that the country's name is now simply "Hungary". Nevertheless, according to the new constitution, the form of government will still explicitly be that of the "Republic". State organs such as "President of the Republic" are still to be found in the new constitution with exactly the same title. What is worrying is that this and other claims are being repeated in the German media, either without the facts being checked or possibly knowingly by those who know them to be false. A similar example would

be a well-known anchorwoman of the German TV channel ZDF who on prime-time said that Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán had “deposed the country’s President”.

One thing that is noticeable in the constitution is the number of references to God. There are also references to the country’s Christian roots and the works of Saint Stephen. In Hungary these are inextricably bound up with the country’s integration into the West and with the overturning of the former pagan society and paganism itself. Any references today to Saint Stephen serve as a reminder of Hungary’s traditional place at the heart of Europe and amongst the European peoples. They are certainly not suggestive of any distancing from Europe. In Hungary today, Christianity and the concept of “Hungarianness” are always accepted in a spirit of tolerance and inclusion. Why else would a constitutional text call for the respect and protection of national and religious minorities, which are considered to be key “nation-building” elements? This kind of understanding can be found throughout the whole constitution.

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NO CHANGES TO THE ORGANISATION OF THE STATE

In terms of the organisation of the state, no significant changes have been made to the legal situation prior to 1 January 2012. As already stated, Hungary remains a Republic and will continue to have a President of the Republic, who will still be elected by Parliament for a period of five years. No changes have been made to the roles and responsibilities of Parliament or the government, and the functions of all the other various state organs also remain exactly as they were before. To this extent, while we can say that the constitution is officially new, it has basically stayed the same in substantive terms (whereas the new version, or amended version, of 1990 was substantively new, but officially remained the old one dating from 1949).

It is for this reason that most of the criticism of the constitution is aimed almost exclusively at form rather than content. Unfortunately, this includes the fact that the opposition parties were not involved in the consultations on the new constitution. However, the critics somehow

“forget” to mention that the opposition unilaterally withdrew from the committee. Continued attempts to include them would have meant that the whole process of actually creating a new constitution would have failed. There was no real willingness to be involved. The clear and unequivocal election result in 2010 was never likely to help calm the situation or even to create a semblance of peace amongst the opposing camps.

THE “CARDINAL ACTS” – THE CRITICISMS SHOULD COME AS NO SURPRISE

Following the introduction of the new constitution, any particularly important issues are to be dealt with in the “Cardinal Acts”. 32 of these basic laws have been issued. In the old constitution there were a similar number of “two-thirds laws”. By the end of 2011, 26 out of 32 of these laws had been passed by Parliament. The remaining 6 are to be passed by the middle of 2012. There is plenty of potential for conflict if they affect public sector workers.

However, the impression was created that specific rules and regulations are fixed in concrete forever, irrespective of who wins a majority in future elections.

In the past, I have criticised the fact that there were too many two-thirds laws in the old Hungarian constitution. That there are a similar number of laws requiring a two-thirds majority in the new constitution is also good grounds for criticism, so any general criticism of this aspect of the constitution should come as no surprise. However, these basic laws give the politically unnecessary and unhelpful impression that specific rules and regulations are somehow fixed in concrete forever, irrespective of who wins a majority in future elections. For Orbán’s critics, this only serves to confirm their suspicions that the orientation of the Prime Minister’s policies owes too much to the past and the actions of his Socialist predecessors.

PREDOMINANTLY SENSIBLE CHANGES TO THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The new electoral system has also come in for criticism. The combined majority and proportional representation system has been retained, although in future there will be more emphasis on the majority element. In the past, 176 of 386 members of Parliament were elected under the majority

system, while in future it will be 106 of 199, something that will of course be to the benefit of the larger parties. However, the requirements for a candidate to stand for election have now been relaxed to some extent. In the past it was necessary to gather the signatures of 750 supporters in a constituency with an average of 45,000 voters (1.7 per cent of the electorate), but under the new electoral system only 1,000 recommendations are needed in a constituency of around 75,000 voters (1.3 per cent of the electorate). The requirements for national lists have also been lowered. The accusation that there has been a certain amount of gerrymandering is not so easy to dismiss, however. While the redrawing of constituency boundaries has corrected some of the inequalities identified by the Constitutional Court, some of the reallocations have clearly not been to the disadvantage of the current ruling party. It must be said that throughout history there have been very few examples of potential gerrymandering opportunities not being fully utilised. One example showing this was the redrawing of Berlin's constituency boundaries in 2000. A distinct advantage of the new system is that there will only be one round of voting in future elections, together with the fact that the Parliament will be also be much smaller.

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THE NEW CHURCH LAW

The equally criticised new church law gives Parliament the power to give formal recognition to churches. Other religious groups that are not recognised as churches will be allowed to function as associations without a special permit being required. This provision has been introduced to put a stop to groups registering as churches in order to take advantage of benefits. There were constant reports of religious groups predominantly focusing on business interests (such as the Scientologists) or using dubious means to attract followers. In the 2011 census, for example, 300 members of the Roma minority living in a village in eastern Hungary claimed to be Buddhists.

Most German observers are aware that the U.S. Embassy in Hungary has voiced particularly strong criticism of the new church law. It acts as a reminder of the fierce American

reaction to the German federal government's refusal to recognise Scientology as a church.

TENURES FOR HOLDERS OF PUBLIC OFFICES

Three main factors need to be taken into account when considering the term limit of nine years for public offices and institutions. Firstly, maximum independence should be achieved by disconnecting them from the parliamentary or presidential mandate. Secondly, the long term of the mandate should provide an additional guarantee of independence. And thirdly, the vote means that Parliament upholds the principle of the sovereignty of the people. With the current parliamentary majority, it is hardly surprising that the favourites of the opposition parties fail to get appointed, and the same would also happen elsewhere in Europe. Whether it is wise to proceed in this way is another question entirely.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION CHALLENGES THE CENTRAL BANK LAW

The new central bank law has attracted particular controversy. One of its provisions is that a new, independent, financial supervisory authority should be established with the power to audit and monitor the country's central bank and its financial regulator.

The European Commission is currently assessing whether this new law infringes the principle of central bank independence and hence is in contravention of EU law. This is perhaps the most serious of three issues that the Commission is currently examining. The Hungarian government has declared itself prepared to compromise in the event that the Commission finds it has breached EU law, and indeed it has already proposed and discussed certain amendments. There seems to be an increasing willingness on the part of the Hungarian government to enter into dialogue and seek consensus.

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JUSTICE AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

The retirement age of judges has been brought forward from 70 to 62 so that it is in line with general pension rules. It goes without saying that this legislation will particularly affect judges from the former communist one-party state. The Hungarian Constitutional Court remains independent, as has been shown by its recent decisions on media and church law which have not been favourable to the government. Although Parliament has curbed the powers of the Constitutional Court to rule on fiscal matters, there is no doubt that the Court still wields a disproportionate amount of power compared to other European countries. This positive assessment has been somewhat tarnished by the changes to the procedures for electing the president of the Curia, Hungary's supreme court. It must be asked why efforts were not made to avert these obvious criticisms that just serve to bolster an overall negative impression.

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However, contrary to the expectations of many people, the institution of the ombudsman was not abolished but instead made more efficient and transparent. In future there will no longer be several different ombudsmen with areas of responsibility that are duplicated and lacking in transparency. The role of "Commissioner for Fundamental Rights" recognises a clearly-defined set of responsibilities relating to guaranteeing the fundamental rights of the country's citizens.

THE MEDIA

The media law attracted a great deal of criticism in early 2011, but only a few, small, mainly technical amendments were made in line with European Commission demands. However, at the end of last year, the Hungarian Constitutional Court questioned certain individual issues, such as the protection of journalistic sources. The most controversial elements of the law have in fact thrown up few problems in practice. At times, the rules on balanced reporting also bite back at the ruling party, as when the state television channel was fined by the media watchdog for biased reporting in favour of the government from 12th to 20th June 2011.

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However, it is equally unfounded and ambiguous to claim that the Media Council is solely made up of Fidesz party supporters.

The Media Council is, by law, an independent body, and no members of political parties are allowed to take part. Its members are appointed by a parliamentary committee which includes representatives of opposition parties. However, the latter withdrew their participation and refrained from making proposals. So it is just a question of semantics whether the independent experts appointed by a parliamentary committee in which the opposition refuse to cooperate can or cannot be called 'party hacks'. The chairperson of the Media Council has aroused particular controversy because she was previously as a member of Fidesz Member of the Hungarian Parliament.

Large-scale redundancies had to be made in the state media due to the need for urgent cost-cutting. This would have been no different in any other European country, indeed it brings to mind the example of Greece, where such necessary austerity measures were put off for months and justifiably attracted a great deal of criticism. In Hungary, the conservative government is doing everything it can to gradually extricate the country from a debt noose that has been tightened by others.

Over recent months, the *Klubrádió* national radio network has provided an example of declining media freedom in Hungary. The network did not have its licence revoked, but when its previous licence ran out it was not renewed in the course of a procedure which could not be faulted on legal grounds. *Klubrádió* did not offer a high enough amount during the bidding process. There are suggestions – which should be taken seriously – that the radio network deliberately engineered this situation in order to give the impression, to the outside world in particular, that it has been the victim of the Orbán government's media policies. The best riposte to critics of the media law is that any criticisms of the present government, the Prime Minister and his ministers that have appeared in the international press have also been reprinted or reported in full in the Hungarian media.

ECONOMIC UPTURN IS A PREREQUISITE FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE ORBÁN GOVERNMENT

The Hungarian economy continues to be extremely fragile. Eight years of Socialist rule have left a heavy burden and problems which seem almost insurmountable. The overall situation in Europe makes it difficult to make significant progress, particularly in Hungary at the moment. We should not forget that Viktor Orbán handed over an orderly budget after his first term as Prime Minister (1998-2002), with sovereign debt just over the 53 per cent mark. When Orbán began his second term, Hungary's sovereign debt had risen to 78 per cent, and by the end of 2011 it had soared to an all-time-high of almost 82 per cent. The government had hoped for better, but these high levels of debt were due to the Hungarian forint hitting a record low of 320 forint to the euro on 4 January 2012, as the debt was mainly in euros. The credit rating agencies also played their part by downgrading Hungary's bonds to junk status. Since then, the forint has rallied and strengthened considerably.

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The planned budget deficit continues to be around 3 per cent, while unemployment figures are static at just below 11 per cent. There were several hikes in consumption taxes at the beginning of 2012, and special taxes have been levied on major operators in the telecommunications, food and energy sectors based on 2009 results and are staying in effect through 2012. In 2011, assets from private pension schemes were returned to the state in an attempt to boost the national budget. But this funding will no longer be available in 2012, and the special taxation measures run out in 2013, so more austerity measures are needed. The Orbán government's plan to dip into the central bank's currency reserves of 35 billion euros may be behind the projected restructuring of this area. The auditing procedures introduced by the European Commission will also have an effect in this respect. It is also unlikely that the government will be able to avoid asking for a further bailout from the IMF and ECB however it tries to word it or justify it. Here too, the Hungarian government will have to show that it is open to dialogue.

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The position of foreign exchange debtors (own-home builders and those affected by the fluctuating Swiss Franc exchange rate) has attracted considerable international attention but has scarcely improved. Around 200,000 borrowers (around one-sixth of the total) have taken advantage of the opportunity to make early repayments at a fixed rate. Most of these were better-off people who could afford to pay off a large amount in full. The Austrian banks in particular were furious at having to accept losses caused by the exchange rate differences and are likely to take legal action. But the vast majority of mortgage-holders who are more than 90 days in arrears with their payments find themselves in a hopeless position, despite the introduction of a few cosmetic initiatives (such as a state-owned asset management company for buying and renting out defaulted properties, the establishment of an entire village of social housing for foreign exchange debtors in Ócsa, and the fixing of losses caused by currency fluctuations).

COMMUNICATION IS OFTEN UNPROFESSIONAL AND INEFFECTIVE

Communication about governmental and parliamentary decisions often leaves much to be desired, particularly outside Hungary. This is even more regrettable because of the fact that these are far-reaching democratic decisions made by the will of the people, and on closer scrutiny they are generally revealed to offer sound, sensible, or at the very least, necessary solutions. But the communication of these decisions often fails to be carried out in a clear and credible way, particularly at European level. This is especially true when it comes to issues that have been seized on by the opposition parties for ongoing public debate.

There is no doubt that Hungary has been subjected to a mountain of criticism that has been short on objectivity and long on hyperbole, and also to criticism that is not borne out by the facts. By the same token, events in Hungary have attracted a great deal of attention – events, that are also the case in other parts of Europe and particularly the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. It is possible to

recognise a strategy in the way the Hungarian government is treated. Apart from occasional visits, there are no longer any German correspondents in Budapest who are able to make up their own minds based on the facts.

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This leads to narratives and assessments being borrowed which then find their way into the German media. This makes it all the more necessary for Hungary to communicate with the media in a more goal-oriented, effective and professional way. This does now seem to be happening, as was demonstrated by János Lázár, leader of the Fidesz Parliamentary Group in the Hungarian Parliament, during a recent public debate at the Hungarian Embassy in Berlin. A similar thing happened the following day when the Hungarian foreign minister, János Martonyi, visited Berlin.

The work of the Hungarian Embassy in Berlin is expressly excluded from this criticism. Embassy staff have clearly made significant efforts to actively tackle the problems and shortcomings of Hungary's image in Germany in a creative way. But in other places, the undeniable successes of the Orbán administration have until now been inadequately communicated, or they have been undermined by poorly-timed political action such as the way the passing of the media law unnecessarily coincided with Hungary taking up the presidency of the EU Council.

To take another example: the Hungarian Guard – to some extent the military arm of the extreme right Jobbik party – faced a deluge of criticism in Germany and, absurdly, was constantly being linked to Fidesz und Orbán. In fact, the Orbán administration has successfully taken strong steps to disband what is left of the Guard, but this fact has been barely acknowledged on the international stage, let alone given the appreciation it deserves.

Hungary's presidency of the EU Council was generally viewed as being reasonably successful, and its Roma integration strategy will have long-lasting effects. Croatia's entry into the European Union was handled in a professional way and the process was progressed to the signature stage. These are just a few examples of Hungary's positive term of office. It would have been desirable if such a 'young'

EU country had been perceived in a more positive light. But instead, the media have placed Hungary next to Belarus and discredited it as being “on the road to dictatorship”. Some of these critics just don’t understand what an insult this is to the people of Belarus and the Ukraine who really are suffering under the oppression of authoritarian regimes and institutions.

ALTERNATIVES AND PROTESTS

As things stand, voters in Hungary are faced with no alternative, even if they want one. Fidesz remains the most popular party and people still believe it is capable of creating change and finding solutions. If an election were to be held now, it is highly likely that Orbán would once again win with a large majority. Nevertheless, Fidesz has lost a good 50 per cent of its support since April 2010, but the opposition parties have failed to capitalise on this. It is not unusual for public support to dwindle around the mid-term point, but the government is also facing increased pressure from civil society. The very respectable turnout of 60,000 demonstrators at the beginning of January should provide it with food for thought. Well-organised counter-demonstrations by large numbers of government supporters should not be condemned, but they are not a solution to the major problems besetting Hungary and Hungarian society.

At present the government is facing increased pressure from civil society. The very respectable turnout of 60,000 demonstrators should provide it with food for thought.

SUMMARY

In 2010, Viktor Orbán inherited a very difficult situation. The country and its government have been forced to turn to their friends and supporters in Europe, and particularly in Germany. Before the elections, Orbán set out very clearly the challenges that lay ahead, and he has tended to go about them like a bull at a gate. There is the ever-present worry that time will run out before all the work can be done, and memories have been awakened of Orbán’s first term in office.

It helps no-one if the European Parliament or the media paint Hungary as a country en route to an “authoritarian regime” or dictatorship. It is equally unhelpful to give the

impression that Hungary should turn back the clock on existing reforms and unpopular changes. Only then will Europe be in a position to help the country with its considerable financial problems. This kind of Europe could very easily scare off other EU members, and it certainly doesn't serve to fire up enthusiasm for Europe.

At the same time, although the Hungarian government obviously has a strong European orientation and can be proud of its successful term as President of the EU Council, it would do well to work harder on its ties to Europe and European mechanisms and on improving the effectiveness of its communication and dialogue. Whoever is in charge, the country now more than ever needs the support of its partners and friends.