

Magyar Nemzet
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Feudalism, rather than corruption

by Áron Kovács

The opposition defines the functioning of the Fidesz government with the following terms: corruption, collusion, theft, mafia, cronies. Mostly, the opposition uses these words as a means of attack, but some of them have made a genuine effort to reveal to the public how the system works. Yet in the end, everyone is surprised: the public is unmoved. How many times have we heard that in a “normal” country, even a fraction of these transgressions would have toppled the government long ago?

That may be. But this is not a normal country. In other words, it is not what people imagine to be normal. Hungary is not a civic democracy, because it lacks the most fundamental ingredient: civic society. To be sure, there was an attempt to establish democracy: the constitutional reform after the fall of communism was more than smoke and mirrors, but it somehow never became part of the national fabric. The same is true of capitalism. Although capitalism harkens back to the end of the 19th century, its essence never took root in the heart of the Hungarians.

But if not a civic society, then what is it? For lack of a better term, I suggest “neofeudalism”; or perhaps “the new serfdom” would be truer to the Hungarian style. To be sure, it’s not entirely accurate, as the system is not actually new. Hungary never outgrew the feudal system - it only updated serfdom periodically to fit the requirements of the age. Upon coming to power in 2010, Fidesz was only the latest to make adjustments to the system: Fidesz strengthened it, since some of its actors were starting to go overboard by thinking that they truly owned their fiefdoms.

I would like to apologize in advance to the Middle Age historians. I do not wish to get involved with feudal political theories, nor with the various manifestations of serfdom, only with the current system. It is possible that what I am writing is not historically accurate, but in the current situation the most useful approach is to examine property ownership. When Lorinc Meszaros “purchases” a new enterprise, it does not mean that he has made an acquisition in the normal sense of the word. Rather, he just takes possession and starts to exercise his feudal rights. He does enjoy income from the property – he goes sailing in the Adriatic – but in reality, the property is not his.

Meszaros is not an entrepreneur, but a “flag-bearing baron”. His counterparts receive entire industrial sectors as part of their fiefdoms. Instead of collecting tribute, they collect subsidies and funding from the state and the European Union. Just recall Istvan Horvath, former mayor of Szekszard and a Fidesz Member of Parliament, who personally decided who would be granted a license to run a local national tobacco store. At the bottom of the system are the multitude of local government officials, business leaders and heads of institutions trying to scrape the bottom of the barrel. In exchange, they serve obediently.

At the top are the near-notables and notables who, by the grace of “king” Viktor Orban, and as a reward for their loyalty, may possess the goods. This loyalty can prove fleeting, and people do fall out of favor with some frequency. Perhaps even the reign of the king is transitory – after all, even he is not the true owner. The system – or, if you wish, the crown – is the true owner. The question arises: is there anyone else who could operate the kingdom as efficiently? No doubt, some will attempt it, but that won’t happen for some time to come. Right now, it would be wise to give up the “they’re stealing” slogan. A bike parked outside the store can be stolen; but what this system does is much worse.

These “lords” have secured the positions of the new aristocracy and nobility for the long term, thereby – among other things - closing off the opportunities for social mobility. This is a problem not only in terms of social policy. These gentlemen simply do not believe in equal rights for every person. In other words, they overturn the most basic and elementary civil rights; they themselves have privileges. Worst of all, they exclude the very possibility of merit-based success. The only thing that matters is loyalty; any expertise is met with suspicion at best. Already in the mid-term, this will lead to serious disruptions.

Naturally, this system faces many challenges. It is a historical irony that this neofeudalism has to function and coexist with the trappings of democracy, the rule of law, and EU membership, causing untold difficulties to the officials of the “royal chancery” who juggle it. Internal dissent, however, is the most dangerous risk. For it may happen that certain actors begin to believe that their feudal holdings are truly their own property. It’s happened before; just recall the case of banker Zoltan Spader. His example shows how viciously the system deals with those who rebel. In a feudal world, failure is much more severe than in a truly democratic system – because you cannot say, oh well, in four years we will try again.