



Hungary - Myths and Facts

Democracy

Myth - The Government is removing all democratic checks and balances in Hungary.

Fact – Democratic checks and balances have not been removed. Parliament remains Hungary's sovereign law making body with the power to scrutinise and approve all legislation. The Constitutional Court still exists and has powers to strike down legislation that is in breach of the Constitution: only in one restricted area of economic policy can it not intervene (budgetary matters, which are rightly the preserve of Parliament). People have the right of assembly and public protest. The rule of law is sacrosanct. A wide range of institutions are operating and they are in no way under government control. Politicians are not above the law or immune to prosecution. There are no limitations to what domestic and foreign media can publish within clearly defined requirements for balance and public decency. The universities are independent and enjoy academic freedom. The judiciary is fully independent. There are NGOs, charities and civil rights groups acting freely and campaigning for laws reflecting their interests and goals, as well as publishing critiques of government policy.

Myth - The Government is straying beyond the mandate it was given by voters in 2010.

Fact - The mandate given to the Government in 2010 was to complete the work of 1989, and to set Hungary finally on the path of a modern democratic state. This is what the Government is acting to do. In 2010, the country was on the brink of economic and moral collapse. The national debt as a proportion of GDP had ballooned from 53% in 2002 to over 80% in 2010. Fidesz approached the 2010 elections with a clear promise to sort out the mess and renew the country in every respect. It subsequently won a 2/3rds majority in a free and fair election. Since then, the Government has got on with implementing the programme of wholesale economic and institutional reform that it promised to implement at the time of the election. The Government is executing the will of the people as expressed through the ballot box.

Myth - The Government has abandoned its commitment to European values.

Fact – The Hungarian Government remains fully committed to European values. As we understand them, European values involve the belief in individual freedom, human rights and the Judaeo-Christian spiritual, moral and cultural heritage. The Government has placed these at the heart of the country's constitution, not least through the incorporation of elements of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights. These values are what Hungarians fought for in 1956, and again on 1989. In light of the country's experiences in the 20th Century, Hungary was a willing signatory of the European Union's founding treaties. We have our disagreements with the EU, as every member state does, and mainly on financial matters. But we remain committed Europeans and we will amend any of our laws that are found to contravene the EU treaties. We will follow the European way.

The Constitution

Myth - The constitution and attendant cardinal laws amount to a 'power grab' by the Government.

Fact - We believe that the previous 'temporary' constitution authored by the communists was a power grab. We are trying to return the power grabbed by the communists to the people of Hungary. The new constitution reflects the values and aspirations of the Hungarian people. It clarifies the relations between state and civil society and between national and local government. It enshrines a classic separation of powers between the legislature, executive and judiciary. It safeguards the democratic institutions of the country and has freedom at its heart. It enshrines in full the European Convention on Human Rights. It is absurd to allege that the document is a threat to basic liberties because it changes the name of the country from "the Republic of Hungary" to "Hungary"; or because it adopts provisions on abortion and marriage that are still normal in much of the Western world. Matters that called for fuller discussion were expressly left out of the Constitution, despite their constitutional importance. Hence, each of the 'cardinal laws' referred to in the constitution has been debated and passed individually by Parliament. Each required a two-thirds majority vote for its approval.

Myth - Because they require a 2/3rds majority vote in Parliament, no future government will ever be able to amend the Cardinal Laws.

Fact - It is by no means impossible to obtain a 2/3rds majority in the Hungarian Parliament - as the current Government has shown. And if a law is genuinely not working, all MPs will combine to remove it.

Myth - *The Government has banned abortion in Hungary.*

Fact - Abortion has not been banned. However, we regard the rights of the human being as sacred, including those of the unborn. This seems to us to be part of the European system of values.

Myth - *The Government has outlawed same-sex marriage.*

Fact - We have upheld the common understanding of marriage, as a binding relation between man and woman. This is what the Hungarian people believe, and as democrats we respect the majority opinion. This does not mean that we have banned partnerships between same sex couples, or put an end to discussions as to how those partnerships might be protected by the law. The constitution has no bearing on registered partnerships, which confer the same legal rights to gay people as to heterosexual couples.

Myth - *The constitution is an exclusively Christian document that excludes citizens of other faiths.*

Fact - The constitution acknowledges the importance of the Christian faith in the history of our country. But it is not a Christian document, and it does not privilege Christians over citizens of other faiths or none. The separation of Church and State is one of the European values to which we are committed.

Government Appointments

Myth - *The Government is filling the senior executive posts of the country's major institutions with its own supporters.*

Fact - The Government is filling senior executive positions through competitive procedures, in order that the most qualified people should be appointed. The new appointees are competent and respected professionals. It is accepted and normal practice for former politicians to enter public service. It happens across Europe and in the US. Hungary is no different.

The Economy

Myth - Hungary is heading for default.

Fact - Hungary is not heading for default; we are solvent with sufficient reserves to cover our commitments through 2012. The markets remain open to Hungary but, like all countries, we do not take the markets for granted. Hence, the Government is negotiating a safety net with the IMF to give reassurance to the markets. We are carrying out the most significant economic reform programme in a generation. We are streamlining government, eliminating excess and making life more affordable for our citizens. The programme is laying the foundations for long-term economic growth.

The Central Bank

Myth - Government is compromising the independence of the Central Bank.

Fact - The 'independence of the central bank' is an undefined notion. It is unclear what arrangements are necessary to satisfy the requirement for it, or whether it has been achieved in other countries. We do not believe our reforms compromise the Central Bank's independence. We are putting in place a framework for decisive and responsible decisions on monetary policy. All governments work closely with their central banks in forming policies in times of financial crisis. Again, Hungary is no different. But if our partners have concerns, we will address them. If the EU finds fault with any detail of the Central Bank Law, we will make amendments as we have done in the past.

Court and judicial reform

Myth - The Government has stripped the Constitutional Court of its powers.

Fact - The Constitutional Court retains its powers and can act on any legislative matter. Only in one restricted area of economic policy can it not intervene – budgetary matters, which are rightly the preserve of Parliament.

Myth - The Government has taken control of the justice system in Hungary.

Fact - The justice system in Hungary is being reformed precisely in order that it should not become the tool of government, as it was under the communists and remained during much of the period between 1989 and today. We are

introducing early retirement for judges because it is the simplest and fairest way to bring in a new generation of judges who embrace reform and change.

The Presidency

Myth - Former President, Laszlo Solyom, was removed because he was a roadblock to reform.

Fact - Laszlo Solyom was not removed from office; he had served his full term. The current president, Pal Schmitt, was elected by Parliament in 2010 in accordance with the rules. The same rules have existed for 20 years and remain in place. According to the rules, all presidents serve five-year terms. Presidents do not have an automatic right to a second term and that applies as much to the highly respected Laszlo Solyom. Only one president in the last twenty years has been re-elected: Árpád Göncz in 1995, when the socialist-liberal MSZP-SDZSZ coalition was in power. During his term of office Mr. Solyom showed that he was not opposed to reforms of the type that Fidesz is enacting.

The Media

Myth - The Media Law threatens free speech.

Fact - The Government wants to ensure that the Hungarian media is open to fair debate, and that freedom of opinion is protected and not abused. We want to ensure that socially damaging abuses like pornography are controlled in the way that the majority of Hungarians wish, for the sake of themselves and their children. The need for new and different media regulation is beginning to be felt all across Europe, as abuses of privacy, impartiality and decency increase. Contrary to predictions, the new law has produced none of the negative outcomes that were predicted. The law is working well and the Media Authority is doing its job professionally. Warnings about self-censorship are well wide of the mark: the only fine imposed so far was given to a presenter for making racist comments. Turn on a TV or open a newspaper in Hungary and you will see that freedom of expression is alive and well.

Myth - The threat of large fines is causing self-censorship among journalists.

Fact - The only fine imposed so far was on a journalist who made racist, hate inciting remarks. The accusation of self-censorship is made without any evidence that the Government has tried to censor anyone. The accusation of self-censorship cannot be proved, as it is wholly a matter of subjective perception.

Myth - The radio station, Klub Radio, was denied a new licence because it was critical of the Government.

Fact - Klub Radio is subject to the same open licence-bidding rules as every other media company in Hungary. It failed to win a licence because it failed to meet the required technical and legal specifications. It is nonsense to suggest that it was shut down by the Government. Klub Radio is perfectly free to bid for a new licence if it chooses to; any application would be judged against the same legal and technical criteria that other bidders would have to meet.

Citizenship and 'Hungarians beyond the borders'

Myth - Fidesz has deliberately upset regional relations by awarding Hungarian citizenship to citizens of neighbouring countries.

Fact - Hungary respects all of its neighbours and wants the very best relations with them. All were well apprised of our intention to address the question of citizenship for Hungarians beyond our borders. With very few exceptions, our neighbours and partners have supported our actions. After all, the move is not without precedent: the post-communist government of Romania has offered citizenship to the Romanians of Moldova; and Germany regards the German populations under Czech, Slovak and Romanian government as entitled to German citizenship. Italy likewise offers citizenship to emigrants of Italian descent. Our intention is not to reopen old debates, but to resolve long-held grievances and harmonise relations between communities. We were responding to a region-wide problem that had never been addressed - the problem of displaced minorities resulting from the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the forced imposition of first Nazism and then communism. There are now nearly 3 million Hungarians living beyond the borders. We took the decision to give citizenship to these people of Hungarian descent and patrimony. Citizenship is granted on the basis of individual application; it is not a collective right.

Elections

Myth - Fidesz has given votes to Hungarians in neighbouring countries to secure extra votes in future elections.

Fact - The votes given to Hungarians abroad are for party lists only. There are various assessments as to the likely effect of these changes: some argue that they

favour Fidesz; others assert the opposite. We have given Hungarians living outside Hungary representation in the Hungarian political process because we believe they should have a say about what goes on in their homeland. Again, there is nothing unusual about this arrangement. Twenty-four out of 27 EU member states allow expatriate citizens to vote for party lists in national elections. Our intention, like that of other countries, is simply to ensure that the needs and interests of our expatriates are represented. We respect without question the territory and sovereignty of our neighbours. We wish for Hungarian minorities to be loyal and grateful citizens of the countries where they reside, just as we wish the same from our minorities in Hungary who have been granted similar voting rights.

Myth - Fidesz is changing Hungary's electoral boundaries to prevent opposition parties from winning future elections.

Fact - Boundary revisions are a normal part of the democratic process in all European countries. We are trying to make constituencies equal in size in the light of demographic changes. The changes are long overdue. Electoral reform was debated at length in the run up to the 2010 election. There was widespread agreement on the need for it. At present some constituencies have three times as many voters as others. Moreover, Hungary has vastly too many MPs - 368 for a population of 10 million (as opposed to 600 for 60 million in Britain). We intend to reduce Parliament to 199 members.

Churches and religions

Myth - The Government is threatening religious diversity in Hungary.

Fact - There is complete freedom of worship in Hungary. The government has not banned any denomination. As part of its anti-corruption stance, the Government is requiring reregistration to ensure that only genuine religious bodies will enjoy state support. Because established churches are entitled to state support, we have acted to limit the number of Churches that are entitled to claim that support. We have placed obstacles in the way of those who would fraudulently claim the privileges of a religion for what is a commercial or political enterprise. The assessment is being made under the aegis of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Myth - The Government has banned a number of non-Christian, non-mainstream religions in Hungary.

Fact – No religions are banned in Hungary. A specified number of religions are officially recognized, which enables them to claim state subsidies for their charitable and community work. The rules have been changed to prevent bogus ‘churches’ claiming funds, unfortunately a common practice over the last two decades. All religious organisations are free to apply for official recognition. There are no restrictions whatsoever on the right to worship in Hungary. The new Church Act guarantees the right to freedom of conscience and religion at both individual and community levels. Churches and religious communities in Hungary are important community actors in society. In addition to their religious activities, they play a very significant role in national life, one the Government supports fully.

Pensions

Myth - *The Government seized control of private pensions against the wishes of savers.*

Fact – The new Constitution states that Hungary will guarantee acceptable living standards for the elderly through the maintenance of a unified state pension system. The state pension fund was on the brink of financial collapse when Fidesz entered office; reform was urgently needed. The Government offered people the opportunity to transfer pensions from private funds to the public fund. These private funds had shown little or no growth in the preceding years. Moreover, savers had been locked into private schemes without exit rights by a previous socialist government in the 1990s: this was an unjust arrangement, without parallel in Europe. With the new measure, all affected savers had the option to remain with their private funds, but the vast majority opted to transfer to the public one.

Prosecuting former prime ministers

Myth - *The Government is bringing charges against former socialist-liberal prime ministers for purely political reasons.*

Fact - There is no question of criminalising the economic policies of the previous governments. Rather, former office holders are being called to account for their activities in order to determine whether or not crimes have been committed on their watch. The prima facie evidence certainly points in that direction, as Parliament concluded following a request from a Green/LMP MP to look into the matter. Not to act would be suggest that these persons are somehow above the law.

Minority Relations

Myth - The Government is xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Roma.

Fact – We deeply resent the charge of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, or being anti-Roma. We acknowledge the contribution made by our Jewish population to the history of Hungary and to its cultural life. Throughout 2012, we will be proudly celebrating the life and achievements of the Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg, who did so much to save members of our Jewish population from deportation and who was 'disposed of' by the communists as a result. We acknowledge the courageous role played by many Jews in the opposition to communism, and we greatly value the contribution they and other communities make to Hungarian public life. Hungary has one of the largest and liveliest Jewish communities in Europe, which includes a Jewish schools system from kindergarten, through to high school and university. Indeed, all thirteen registered minorities have their own system of self-government and cultural autonomy in Hungary.

Improving Roma life chances is a priority of this Government. We are working hard to integrate our Roma population and to ensure that they have equality of standing with all other Hungarians. All governments in our region have acknowledged the need to do something to overcome the disadvantages that Roma people have faced, and we are in consultation with our neighbours and with representatives of the Roma community in order to find the best way forward. The governing party has several members of Jewish descent, and Fidesz sent the second-ever Roma MEP, Livia Jaroka, to the European Parliament in 2004. The Hungarian Presidency of the EU was instrumental in bringing the EU's Roma Strategy into being, a recognised achievement across Europe. The Government has taken swift and decisive action to prevent persecution of the Roma, outlawing vigilante groups. Under the previous government there were frequent provocative displays by the far right, and the appalling series of murders committed in 2008 and 2009 was met with what could most kindly be described as incompetence and indecision.

Hungary seeks to maintain friendly relations with all our neighbors, and in this we have been successful. But we are not prepared to remain silent in the face of persecution of members of Hungarian minorities within or beyond our borders.

Myth - The Government shares the values and objectives of Jobbik.

Fact - We do not share the values and objectives of Jobbik - we are defined by our opposition to them and everything they stand for. But nor do we turn our backs on those who voted for Jobbik, any more than we turn our backs on those who voted for the socialist opposition. We want to represent all Hungarians, including those of mistaken or primitive views.