

Theories and Practices Concerning Legitimisation Crises¹

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Abstract

Reform processes in the economic and political system, starting at the end of the 1960s, paved the way for the change of the political system 20 years later. As it is known, these essentially took place in the spirit of a 'social contract' frequently referred to, which also contributed to the preservation of the legitimacy of the system. The biggest task of the transition was to create a constitutional system on the basis of the rule of law together with democratic institutions. In the meantime, the delegitimisation of the old regime was irrevocably completed both practically and symbolically with the reburial of Imre Nagy and the self-dissolution of the communist party. The legitimacy problem and weakness during the transition was partly caused by the fact that mass support for the new parties was uncertain. Furthermore, the factor referred to by several experts that there was no foundation act creating the legitimacy of the new regime also had a negative impact.

Key words: legitimisation, legitimacy, political stability, legitimacy crises, change of regime in Hungary.

Perhaps it is no exaggeration to state that in the past two decades and especially at the time of the crisis and collapse of the monolithic regimes in Central Europe, legitimacy became one of the central categories – or key term, if you like – of political science. All the more so, as regarding their legitimisation, the fragile democracies emerging in the former Eastern bloc countries had an unstable basis for quite a long time. In the new democracies, the pressure for modernisation, the introduction of a functioning market economy and the downsizing of the social functions of the state considerably increased the number of losers during the change of regime, which led to a lot of social tension in most post-communist countries. This involved a long-lasting weakening of the legitimacy of the governments in power, managing the transition. They tried to compensate for their weakened legitimacy by the use of different legitimisation ideologies but did not succeed in fully eliminating the problem.

It can be stated that the issue of legitimacy has been a recurring element in everyday political and political debates for long. This also clearly indicates the ongoing correctness of the topic and the necessity of further theoretical investigations. The diversified problems of legitimacy have been the focus of a lot of scholarly investigations so far. The majority of modern theoreticians were concerned with the legitimacy types of the different political systems and regimes. A large number of authors argued for or against legitimisation crises, seeking an answer, among others, to the question whether the established liberal democracies were exposed to the risk of legitimisation crises or not, and if yes, what causes this risk might be led back to. A lot of experts investigated the legitimisation efforts of state socialist regimes as well as the causes of their delegitimisation. Furthermore, it is a question that regarding their legitimacy, how stable the basis of the new democracies, including Hungary, was in the period following the change of regime.

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My paper strives to give an overview of the theoretical issues of legitimacy, compare research findings in this topic and present problems with the aim to contribute somewhat to the further thinking about and clarification of the theoretical issues of political legitimacy with my own observations and theoretical investigations.

The concepts and theoretical framework of legitimation and legitimacy

The concept of legitimation probably comes up most often in relation to the political categories of power and rule. It is when one puts the question what the reason is for the fact that people obey a power above them which fundamentally influences their everyday life conditions with its operation and decisions. And regard it obligatory to comply with the legal and social norms imposed upon them by such a power that one gets closest to the concept of legitimation. Any power whose coercive decisions the subjects accept and carry out can be regarded legitimate. Thus, the society legitimises the political system by adhering to the decisions of the executive power. The stability of any political system greatly depends on its legitimation and acknowledgement by the society. In general, the issue of legitimation comes to the limelight when a new rule emerges or when the existing political and constitutional system is moving towards a crisis. It is especially in these and similar historical moments that the foundation or reinforcement of its legitimacy becomes important for a power. Guglielmo Ferrero, one of the well-known theoreticians of the field writes: 'No government is born legitimate but some of them become legitimate because they manage to get accepted. Therefore, for the sake of the survival and stability of its rule, every government constantly needs confirmation.'⁴

Thus, it is an essential property of power that it makes efforts to prove that its existence is justified. Every political system requires that its subjects regard the norms and laws created by it worthy of acknowledgement and obligatory to comply with. Even the dictatorships of the different ages made considerable efforts to create the appearance of legitimacy and justify their political system. In general, it can be stated that if the subjects believe in the rule being just and see its operations as justified, then they obey its orders willingly, out of some kind of conviction or other motivations. In this case, we are concerned with a legitimate rule. In every case, legitimation must come from below. The power which serves the rise in status and the safety of its citizens has the best chance to obtain legitimacy. Any political system may obtain legitimacy if it manages to get accepted by its subjects.

It is revealed from the above that in this sense, the concept of legitimacy and legitimation may only be applied to the political system. Only the political system is capable of obtaining, possessing and losing legitimacy.

The shattering of political stability and legitimacy crises

In the next section, the causes leading to the destabilisation of the political system and legitimacy crises will be briefly discussed particularly because the problem of political legitimacy usually arises in relation to political stability. In most cases, legitimacy crises are symptoms accompanying the shattered stability or radical transformation of the political system. According to Ferrero's theory,⁵ even the crisis of the Roman Empire may be regarded as a legitimacy crisis. However, I should not like to go back so much in time as in my opinion, one can only speak about real legitimacy crises after the emergence of modern states. In West Europe, theories about legitimacy crises have been created in a greater number since the 1960s and they have had a powerful impact on empirical research in the field.

By approximately the mid 60s, the developed western states, leaving behind the horror of the two world wars, had succeeded in building out modern welfare states on the basis of liberal democracy. Due to this, the meaning of legitimacy underwent a further change. The provision of social rights, state services creating welfare and the successful management of social conflicts were added to the defining properties of legitimacy. In the 1960s and 1970s, the economic difficulties and the appearance of social conflicts and new movements questioned the legitimacy of the developed welfare states, formerly believed to be strong, and at the same time indicated that the preservation and continuous provision of legitimacy continued to be a real challenge in liberal democracies due to its new foundation. Seymour Martin Lipset discusses legitimacy crises in relation to social conflicts. According to his theory, legitimacy crises are phenomena accompanying structural changes in society. They arise when 1. The status of the institutions of the old regime is shattered, 2. During the transition, important groups are excluded from the political system, 3.

⁴ FERRERO, Guglielmo: A hatalom. A legitímáció elvei a történelemben. ['Power. Legitimation principles in history'] Budapest: Kairosz, 2001. ISBN 963-9302-68-6. s. 164.

⁵ See detailed: FERRERO, Guglielmo: Újjáépítés – Talleyrand Bécsben 1814-1815. [The Reconstruction of Europe. Talleyrand and the Congress of Vienna 1814-1815] Budapest: Osiris, 2002. ISBN 963-3892-07-4.

Sometime after the changes, it turns out that the new system is not efficient enough. To put it briefly, a legitimacy crisis arises when the legitimacy of a regime is questioned for some reason. The subjected question the institutions and central values of the establishment. Readiness to obey vanishes as the citizens do not consider the norms worth following. If this distinction is maintained, and it is assumed that for the developed western states, /liberal/ democracy is the ultimate stage of development, it seems that these states may 'only' be confronted with a functional crisis. There may be several causes of political instability. Next, two theories will be briefly discussed that involve the problem of legitimacy, as well.⁶

1. The first theory finds the causes of political instability primarily in socio-psychological factors. The central concept in Ivo K. Feierabend and Rosalind L. Feierabend's thesis is 'system frustration', which may be empirically measured. Its level is indicated by the discrepancy between articulated social needs and their fulfilment. The higher the level of 'system frustration', the greater the risk of political instability. The central concept in Ted Robert Gurr's thesis is 'relative deprivation', which is based on the frustration-aggressively relation, well-known in psychology. According to it, unfulfilled desires and aborted plans corroborate the inclination for aggressively. The level of 'relative deprivation' is also indicated by the discrepancy between the demand of society for certain assets and the ability to acquire them. The social dissatisfaction arising from this may manifest itself in revolts, strikes, coups d'état and probably even in revolutions.

It is absolutely necessary to point out that frustration and deprivation do not lead to instability in every case. For example, at the time of the Great Depression, both the societies of Germany and the United States were overwhelmed by the feelings of anxiety and deprivation. However, there was a marked difference in how the crisis unfolded. While in Germany, the crisis meant the end of democracy, in the United States, the system remained stable. The cause might be that in contrast to Germany, in the United States, the legitimacy crisis had been solved in a positive way earlier, when the economic problems could hardly be felt.

2. The second theory is that of Lipset's. According to his thesis, every aspect of economic development – industrialisation, urbanisation, welfare and education – is so closely related to the others that they make up one single large factor the political equivalent of which is democracy. Lipset comes to the conclusion that those democratic countries are more stable which have better parameters in economic development and educational qualifications. Those countries which have more modest results in these fields are politically unstable. The majority of voters are attracted by extremist movements. To have the full picture, Lipset adds that the stability of a given democracy does not only depend on how developed the economy is but also on the efficiency and legitimacy of its political system.

Legitimacy problems during the change of regime in Hungary

Reform processes in the economic and political system, starting at the end of the 1960s, paved the way for the change of the political system 20 years later. As it is known, these essentially took place in the spirit of a 'social contract' frequently referred to, which also contributed to the preservation of the legitimacy of the system. In a somewhat simplified way, this social contract declared that if people were ready to forget the past and did not turn against the existing system, they would get the chance to live a happier life. In return for the society's acquiescence, the party offered material benefits and an undisturbed life. The regime was only able to finance the goulash communism, which followed, by using up all its internal reserves. This had become evident by about the mid 80s. To this, the Soviets' non-intervention foreign policy came as a favourable external condition, and these circumstances together created the possibility of political change.

The biggest task of the transition was to create a constitutional system on the basis of the rule of law together with democratic institutions. In the meantime, the delegitimisation of the old regime was irrevocably completed both practically and symbolically with the reburial of Imre Nagy and the self-dissolution of the communist party. As the old regime lost its legitimacy, such a transitional state/ legitimacy vacuum started which realistically involved the risk of a legitimacy crisis. At this point, the legitimacy of the new political parties was quite doubtful as their social basis was unknown. For them, solely the roundtable negotiations provided an opportunity to gain some kind of legitimacy surplus by demonstrating to the public that they were ready to manage the changes. They needed this badly as their mass support was not at all evident.⁷

⁶ FISICHELLA, Domenico: A politikatudomány alapvonalai. ['The basics of political science'] Miskolc: IC(P) HOLDING Rt., 1991. ISBN 963-04-1192. s. 111.

⁷ BAYER, József: A politikai legitimitás. ['Political legitimacy'] Budapest: Napvilág, 1997. ISBN: 963-8555-78-5. s. 269.

After the first free elections, *János Kis* explained the legitimacy problem of the new regime by the lack of a foundation act creating its legitimacy.⁸ According to Bayer, the initial legitimacy deficit cannot be satisfactorily explained by the lack of such a foundation act. He says that the poor performance of the first government put into power by the free elections in solving the crisis, the subsequent social crisis and the rapid failure to come up to welfare expectations were all important factors in this.⁹ As an important factor, Kis also mentions the lack of a mass movement. It is a well-known fact that the change of regime was directed by social elites.

Kis finds this problematic because this way, society was not penetrated with the feeling that the democratic state was their own creation, and consequently, people were not willing to make sacrifices for the sake of economic reforms. Thus, the legitimacy problem and weakness during the transition was partly caused by the fact that mass support for the new parties was uncertain. Furthermore, the factor referred to by several experts that there was no foundation act creating the legitimacy of the new regime also had a negative impact. Possible causes include the lack of a mass movement and the arrangements made by the elites without involving the public. Following the first free elections, the legitimacy deficit might have been enhanced by certain measures of the government, a rapid loss of illusions and the confrontation with the problems of the country. I think that due to the above factors, the legitimacy of the new Hungarian democracy is still an issue, and it is not accidental that the quality and depth of the change of regime is questioned from time to time. Still, it would be in the interest of the political elite to do away with this problem as soon as possible and solve it in a way that is acceptable and reassuring for the society, as well.

⁸ KIS, János: Gondolatok a közeljövőről. [‘Thoughts about the near future’] Magyar Hírlap, 1992. December 24., ISSN 1786-478X. s. 8.

⁹ BAYER, József: A politikai legitimitás. [‘Political legitimacy’] Budapest: Napvilág, 1997. ISBN: 963-8555-78-5. s. 273.