

POLICYSOLUTIONS

**FRIEDRICH  
EBERT  
STIFTUNG**

Büro Budapest

# The Hungarian Dream

**What kind of future do Hungarians dream of for themselves  
and for Hungary?**



November 2017

## Executive Summary

**The American dream. Everyone knows this concept.** According to the American national ethos, everyone in the US has the chance to make their own luck regardless of ethnicity, social background, skin colour, or religious affiliation. They can pull themselves up by the bootstraps, earn a decent salary, and even become wealthy. As the US Declaration of Independence puts it, everyone has the right to the pursuit of happiness. Illustrative examples from real life along with hundreds of Hollywood films relentlessly propagate the chance to realise the American dream: They show how penniless immigrants turned into billionaires, dispossessed individuals became successful persons who realised their aspirations, or how a “skinny African-American kid” rose to the presidency of the United States.

The idea underlying the American dream is that the **US institutional structure, liberal democracy, the rule of law, and liberty pave the way and provide opportunities for those who are talented and work hard.** And even though these days roughly half of Americans no longer subscribe to the American dream, the myth, the vision, and the common goal persist in that country.

**Such clearly delineated “dreams” are not typical of other countries.** Numerous historical periods in a wide array of geographical locations, from the United Kingdom to China, have seen dreams being set out for certain countries, but only few of these managed to establish themselves in the public awareness of the respective societies. **In 2012, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung performed a joint research project with the Russian Academy of Sciences in which they surveyed the “Russian dream,”<sup>1</sup> which revealed that Russians desire social justice and a strong and stable country.** American-type free markets, self-realisation and western values writ large only have marginal support in Russia, with only a few percent identifying them as desirable.

The differences between the American dream and the Russian dream are readily understandable because of divergent historical developments, institutional settings, cultural values, geographical positions, and political systems.

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<sup>1</sup> *Felix Hett and Reinhard Krumm, The Russian Dream: Justice, Liberty, and a Strong State, 2013, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD-124-10-15.pdf>*

**But which one is the Hungarian dream closer to?** To the American dream of self-realisation? To western liberal democracies? To the strong state preferred by the Russians? Or is there something like a special Hungarian dream? Do Hungarians dream at all? Do we have common goals, a public consensus about what constitutes an ideal society, an ideal “Hungarian life”?

**These are the questions that Policy Solutions and the Budapest office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung wanted to explore, and to this end we launched a major research project to find the answer to the question: *What is the Hungarian dream?*** In this research we performed **focus group interviews** in numerous locations throughout the country – in Budapest, Miskolc, Győr, and Szigetvár – and then we also conducted a **representative survey in the summer of 2017 on a 1,000-person sample**. Our partner in performing these surveys and focus groups was **Závecz Research**.

Our research questions cover four broad areas: the **dream patterns of Hungarians; how Hungarians relate to the past; Hungarians’ plans for the present, and their ideas about the future.**

As a first step in our research, we sought to ascertain **whether Hungarians dream at all, whether they have long-term goals in their lives.** Everyone has a different idea as to how dreams are realised. There are those who make plans and trust in themselves; there are those who pray to god and hope for help; and there are others still who want the state to help them realise their goals. The two think tanks involved in this project sought to find out **which methods we Hungarians prefer.** In this country, which is known for its pessimism, another important question was **whether we vest any hopes in the realisation of our dreams,** whether we believe that whatever the “Hungarian dream” may be, we have a chance at attaining it.

The results show that **society is divided into three major groups: roughly a third of Hungarians have dreams regarding the future, a quarter used to have such dreams but has since abandoned them, while a third have never even dared to dream.** The **age of 40 is a significant line of demarcation:** a substantial majority of those below this milestone have dreams, but beyond that age dreams appear to dissipate. A third of those over 40 are persons who used to have dreams but have given up on them.

**Women are overrepresented among those who have abandoned their dreams.** Geographic variations in standards of living are also manifest with respect to dreams: those who most typically nourish some dreams tend to be persons with completed higher education and typically live in the country's wealthier regions, i.e. northwestern and central Hungary. Half of the people in southwestern Hungary, by contrast, have never had any dreams, **while in north Hungary the ratio of those who have given up on their dreams is exceedingly high.**

**The country is also divided into three parts with respect to the actions they take to realise their dreams.** Every fourth Hungarian makes plans and works to realise their goals. At the same time, however, **a quarter of Hungarians – especially the young – trust in the help of relatives or friends, in other words in the strength of their personal networks.** Finally, **a third of the population simply trust in a miracle or pray for their dreams to be realised.**

**Half of the Hungarian public evinces some degree of optimism regarding their future,** that is they tend to be more confident than not that they will realise their goals. **One-third are decidedly pessimistic, however, they do not believe that their dreams will be realised.** While in central Hungary every fifth person says they are completely certain that they will attain their goals, **in eastern Hungary the corresponding ratio is a mere 4%.**

In order to comprehensively understand the Hungarian dream, to sketch our ideas of the future, we must also get to know **what we think about the past.** That is why in this research we also asked respondents to **evaluate the great historical periods of the past hundred years or so, starting with the Austro-Hungarian monarchy all the way to the post-regime transition period.** Which period do they find it easier to identify with, when did Hungarians fare best? We examined the past 27 years since 1990 based on the assessments of individual governments in this period, and we were also curious to find out whether respondents thought that their parents' lives had been better than their own, and how they see their children's prospects as compared to their own.

**The results show that for every fourth Hungarian, the pre-1989 Kádár regime was the best, this period was the “dream age” of the past century broadly understood.** The older the respondents were and the lower their educational attainment, the more likely they were to take a positive view of the decades preceding democratic transition in Hungary. The old regime enjoyed especially high levels of support in northern Hungary, in the Northern Great Plain region, and in smaller villages generally.

**Apart from the most popular Kádár era, Hungarians were most likely to choose the answer “don’t know” when we inquired which period they considered Hungary’s golden age.** Especially those under 30 were uncertain in this respect, over half of that age group were unable to provide an answer. Those under 40 are the age group in which the post-1989 period enjoys a very slim plurality as compared to the pre-1989 period. A fifth of Hungarians feel that the post-transition period was the best period for them: especially those who are under forty years of age, live in Budapest, and are likely to have completed higher education tend to prefer the past 27 years. None of the other historical periods (Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Horthy period, Rákosi era) has captured the imagination of a large segment of society, their levels of “support” in society at large are under 5%.

The low level of support for the post-transition period is also obviously reflected in the assessment of post-1989 governments. **Most of those surveyed did not even make a selection when asked which of the governments in recent years they had preferred: a fifth of the total Hungarian public assessed that none of these governments had been good for Hungary, while a quarter of respondents could not or did not want to answer this question.** Among the various governments that have been in office over the past 27 years, the incumbent Orbán government became the most popular even though only 16% of the public picked it as the best government. On the whole, 31% of Hungarians assessed that Hungarians lived better under rightwing(-populist) governments, while 21% feel that we fared better when leftwing(-liberal) governments were in charge.

The nostalgia towards the Kadar-era is also manifest in the fact that **Hungarians tended to take a somewhat positive view of the past when we asked them how they see the situation of their parents’ generation.** Thirty-one percent of respondents

indicated that they believe their parents had been better off, 28% thought they had been worse off, and 35% assessed that there was no major change, that is when they were the same age as the respondents now, their parents' standard of living had been roughly the same as the respondents' own today. Similarly, **when we queried them about their dreams for the future, roughly a third of the population seemed very disappointed, a further third were resigned while the final third appeared optimistic.**

There may be many reasons to explain why dreams were realised in some cases and failed to be realised in others. **One may believe that some external factor facilitates or impedes the realisation of the Hungarian dreams:** NGOs, the European Union, the government, or even our own family. Thus, in our questions we also looked at these social agents and asked Hungarians to assess whether they assumed the aforementioned to have benevolent or malign intentions.

According to the Policy Solutions – FES study, **Hungarians primarily – that is seven out of ten respondents – trust family and friends when they need help in realising their dreams. Half of all respondents thought that it is up to us, that is the Hungarian society to help realise the Hungarian dream. Among institutions – which lagged far behind personal relations on this question – the European Union is considered the agent that is most likely to help in realising dreams;** a quarter of the public has a decidedly positive view of the EU in this context. It is a sign of the low level of confidence in institutions that **only 17% of the public expects the government to help them in realising their dreams, while 14% expect this from Hungarian corporations, 8% from multinationals, and 7% from NGOs.** The majority of respondents, however, fundamentally regard these agents as neutral in this context. **Negative sentiments are widespread when it comes to the role of the government, however, as four out of ten respondents assessed that the latter is impeding them in the realisation of their dreams.**

In the case of multinational corporations, this ratio stands at 25%, but even Hungarian enterprises are viewed negatively in this context by a fifth of the population.

Nevertheless, respondents indicated that the **biggest obstacle to the realisation of dreams is their low income**. In 2016, Eurostat indicated that the net median income in Hungary stood at 124,000 (ca. 400 euros) forints while the average income was 192,000 (ca. 650 euros). Yet **with respect to incomes, it is not only the actual wages of Hungarians that lag far behind the corresponding values in western Europe, but so do their dreams**: only 12% of respondents indicated that they would need an income in excess of 500,000 forints to cover their expenses if they were living the life of their dreams. At the same time, 28% of Hungarians said they would need between 300,000 and 500,000 forints a month to live the life of their dreams, while 36% could make do with 200,000-300,000 to this end. **In other words, three-quarters of Hungarians indicated a monthly amount well above the median and mean salaries as the amount of money they would need to realise their dreams.**

Looking at the respondents' assessment of past and present will help us better understand what Hungarians are dreaming about, what the Hungarian dream is. As one would expect, personal preferences diverge from the aspirations that individuals hold out for the state/country, but in both cases respondents were given a dozen different options. In order to allow us to present the different visions in the public concerning Hungary's future in sharp relief, we offered stark options such as whether Hungary should be part of the East or the West; whether it should maybe go its own distinct way; or whether it should aim to be more like specific countries, such as the United Kingdom, Austria, Switzerland, or other western or northern European countries; or whether it should be like Russia. Finally, we sought to gauge Hungarians' optimism towards the future.

Based on the responses in this segment, **Hungarians' most important personal aspiration is a healthy life**. This was the most frequently chosen option by respondents (56%) when they were asked what their most important personal dreams were. **After health, Hungarians most often indicated a desire for a pay or pension that was sufficient to provide them with a safe subsistence**; almost every second Hungarian chose this option. In terms of age distribution, this particular desire is most widespread among the oldest age group, those over 60 – similarly to the desire for a healthy life. Interestingly, **there is no correlation between higher educational attainment and the desire for a safe subsistence, as those with a maximum of 8 years**



**of elementary education were just as likely to desire this as those with completed tertiary education and all groups in between the two. A happy relationship and family life** (mentioned by 42% of respondents) is closely correlated with age: the younger a respondent, the more likely he or she was to select this answer.

The notion that the **future of our children and grandchildren ought to be secure** is primarily of interest for those in their fifties, but it is also a priority for every second person in the entire public. **Job security and good working conditions** were primarily selected by younger respondents.

**Young respondents were also exceedingly more likely to dream of a nice spacious flat, foreign vacations, moving abroad, and learning foreign languages.** One striking data point was the **high ratio of young respondents, one-fifth, who indicated that they want to move abroad.** In terms of its regional distribution, this dream of emigration is most popular in northern Hungary. Interestingly, respondents in their fifties were most likely to say that they wanted to start their own business or NGO. Another surprising observation was **that respondents over the age of sixty were most likely to say that they wanted to do something to help our country, to boost Hungary's success (the number was still fairly low, however, at only 5%) as compared to the least patriotic generation of respondents, those in their thirties, only 1% of whom mentioned working for their country.**

**Beyond the personal dreams, we also surveyed respondents about their hopes for the future. We wanted to find out what our compatriots thought it would take for Hungary to be a flourishing country 20 years hence.**

**According to the respondents, the most important factors in making Hungary flourish would be significantly higher salaries and pensions – this option was chosen by far more than half of all respondents. The second most frequently mentioned aspect of a better future was an improvement in the healthcare system, which was chosen by every third respondent. And the third most popular dream regarding the country's future was also financial in nature: 27% mentioned that Hungary would need to be economically stronger and more modern. The share of those who view scaling back corruption as the key to Hungarian success is just as**



high. **Overcoming differences in wealth** is important to a quarter of Hungarians, primarily those in their fifties as well as respondents with at least eight years of primary education.

**Almost one in five respondents noted that Hungary would need peace and social cohesion to flourish. Ending immigration as an essential precondition for allowing Hungary's fortune to improve was mentioned especially often by respondents in their forties. Thirteen percent of the total population assessed that for the Hungarian dream to be realised, it is absolutely essential that no persons with a foreign cultural background or religion be allowed to settle in Hungary. The classical liberal fundamental principles of free competition and the protection of property were only considered vitally important by 4% of respondents. The share of those who think it would be crucial to restore Hungary's pre-Trianon borders was even lower, however.**

As it emerges from the answers presented thus far, **the "Hungarian dream" is very different from the American conceptions of self-realisation and free markets, while it is closer to continental western European values and especially remote from the self-understanding of eastern traditional societies.** The latter was also readily apparent when we asked respondents whether Hungary ought to look more like a western or an eastern country or if it should follow its own path. The answers revealed that the notion of **an eastern orientation was not supported by any significant share of the public (2%), while at the same time the share of those who think we should look more like western Europe (e.g. Austria) was roughly just as high as the ratio of those who think Hungary should follow its own path.** The idea of a "Third Way" or a "Hungarian way" is very strongly present in Hungarians' thinking, in fact it commands a slightly larger following than the idea of becoming more like the western world.

Looking at the latter issue in more detail, we observe that **of the European countries, Hungarians would most likely choose Austria (24%) or Switzerland (22%) as a model,** followed with a substantial gap by Germany (11%) and the Scandinavian countries (10%). Only 7% of respondents chose England, while only 2% each would want Hungary to look like France or Russia. **At the same time, however, a very high**

percentage of respondents, 22%, could not or did not want to name any country that they thought of as a role model for Hungary.

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**So, what's the Hungarian dream like? Primarily, we long for material well-being and good health, which we want to attain through a combination of our own values and western values.** Economic development, wealth, a reduction in income disparities, less corruption – **in other words material issues beat out all other types of dreams.** In addition to making sure that our wallets are full, **we primarily expect the state to improve healthcare.** The vast majority of Hungarians are interested in their own **personal wealth and security rather than the fate of the country as a whole.**

Hungarians are **most likely to trust their immediate environment and their social networks** rather than institutions. **Hence family is a key value for them:** young people desire stable romantic relationships, while the elderly want security for their children and grandchildren. Nevertheless, **an attachment to nature and environmental protection** are among the few post-materials values that also are present in society. At the same time, a sense of **wanting to leave** is also fairly widespread among Hungarians: every fifth believes that they will realise their dreams abroad, and the possibility to travel is among the more important dreams throughout all social strata.

**Thus, Hungarians do not want either an unfettered market or a multicultural society. At the same time, the majority of society also appear unmoved by traditionalist values, nationalism, and the restoration of the pre-Trianon borders. American-type self-realisation is just as remote from the majority's dream as the Russian-type strong law and order state.** On the whole, what best captures the Hungarian dream is the notion that **Hungarians wish they lived some 800 kilometres further west – somewhere near the Austrian-Swiss border: in the predictability, safety, and social equality of the Kádár regime combined with a western European standard of living.**

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