

The first all-inclusive left-wing protest

On January 2nd Fidesz took a little break and celebrated itself and its new Fundamental Laws at the Budapest Opera. After slightly over a week without a demonstration, the opposition, too, gathered for the occasion, though in a less celebratory mood than the official guests. For the first time, the entire left-wing opposition assembled to protest the new constitution, though in addition to the new constitution topics ranged from the plethora of key laws passed before new year all the way to the alarming economic developments and the spectre of state default. The protests revealed both good news and bad news for Fidesz. The early rapprochement of its antagonists might make it easier for the governing party to conflate new political actors with the widely distrusted established players. At the same time, the January 2nd rally was also a sign that Fidesz can and has gone far enough to trigger unity where it was hardly conceivable a few months ago.

Left-wing demonstrations against the government have become so ubiquitous that those particularly eager protesters who wish to attend each and every one of them will gradually have to think about quitting their jobs – if they have one, that is. Of course, the government is also making it easy to find a cause for every day.

It is simultaneously attacking the sorry remnants of the opposition media, taking out Hungary's only left-wing radio station, for example, and running the economy – which was supposed to be the centrepiece of the government's agenda to restore Hungary after years of Socialist misgovernment – into the ground.

An unusually unruly left-wing crowd

While Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used the occasion of the entry into effect of his most significant legislative feat to date, Hungary's new Fundamental Laws, for a state-sponsored celebration at the Budapest Opera, the opposition gathered for a surprisingly well-attended demonstration along Andrásy boulevard, adjacent to the Opera.

Though as usual no major police engagement was required to ensure the safety of the celebrants, the crowd present was in parts more aggressive than one is accustomed to from left-wing demonstrations. One of the invitees, right-wing journalist and academic Péter Szabó Szentmihályi, even claimed that he and his wife were assaulted by some demonstrators. If that is true, that would definitely mark a new quality in left-wing street activism. In any case, the aggressive mood shows that the government's antics are bringing portions of the anti-Orbán coalition to the streets that no longer fit the existing demographics of tree-huggers, urban intellectuals and MSZP-pensioners.

How many uninvited?

The aftermath of the demonstration witnessed the usual numbers game, with the organisers probably inflating participation, while the government-controlled and Fidesz media downplayed the numbers. Public television news skilfully managed to film an empty segment

of Andrásy, subsequently claiming somewhat implausibly that they physically couldn't capture a better location. Unfortunately, their credibility is already battered by a series of embarrassing manipulations.

Ultimately, however, it is hardly relevant whether 30-50,000 participated or a hundred thousand, as the organisers claimed. In light of historical attendance at left-wing rallies, the cold weather, and the fact that this is generally a time spent with the family in overheated living rooms, the number was impressive in any case. At the same time, as for expressing popular dissatisfaction with the Orbán government, either number was still underwhelming. To take Viktor Orbán down, which is one of the very few issues the protesters would be able to agree on, it'd require protests that are several orders of magnitude larger than any of those experienced hitherto.

First frail signs of unity

Numbers were not the key feature of the January 2 demonstration, however. It was thus far the most inclusive left-wing event and the usually strong demarcation between civil and political organisations, and between political organisations, was relegated to the background. Some of the general hostility towards politicians, and particularly MSZP and Gyurcsány's new party, DK, was still there, but there was a growing if grudging acceptance that Fidesz' policies render this division less relevant by the day.

While there had been plenty of cross-attendance of sympathisers at the various earlier rallies and demonstrations, the January 2 outing was the clearest indication of a rainbow type of anti-Fidesz movement coalescing around a range of parties and organisations that have a stake in combating Fidesz and its policies.

Fidesz' fires the opening salvo in the formation of the new coalition

Since the end of December, street demonstrations have appeared to take on a different and enhanced meaning for the left-wing organisations and activists involved. A key trigger of this transformation was one of the more stunning end-of-the-year surprises by Fidesz. In its rush to pass laws at a record pace, Fidesz dispensed even with the pretence of debate in Parliament and has changed parliamentary rules to allow for passing a bill within two days. For certain bills, opposition parliamentary factions would have an entire 15 minutes each to argue against the proposal.

In practice the proposal would do little but formalise what Fidesz has already made eminently clear, namely that parliamentary approval is nothing but a formality that delays urgent action. While opposition MPs struggled to keep up with the barrage of proposals emanating from the government benches so that they could formulate their public criticisms, one would be hard pressed to find anyone who believes that most government MPs know what they are voting on. The introduction by Fidesz of a bill without a title or actual text was an ironic but also highly symbolic move illustrating how the legislature works under Fidesz's control.

Yet by effectively shedding the thin veneer of parliamentarism that framed its radical legislative agenda, Fidesz appears to have provided LMP with a convenient pretext for publicly acknowledging what it presumably has known for a while now: the party's efforts at constructive opposition are pointless and – despite the occasional kind words by Orbán and other government politicians – substantially unappreciated by Fidesz.

Extra-parliamentary opposition

MSZP has been considerably more sceptical of the value of parliamentary work to begin with, and having failed to be recognised as a parliamentary faction, Ferenc Gyurcsány's Democratic Coalition (DK) is bereft even of the few privileges that the other parliamentary opposition parties enjoy. As both parties showed when they hurried to exploit the publicity generated by LMP's pre-Christmas civil disobedience protest, they will have no problem latching onto future initiatives at extra-parliamentary opposition.

While this will cause some irritation, as LMP is clearly determined to generate media events that primarily serve to benefit its own standing, it is impossible not to notice how markedly LMP's tone is changing towards the Socialists. Despite some potential resentment on account of copyright infringement, joint protesting and opposition action will become more typical than it was hitherto, where concerns about associating with unpopular figures led many players to eschew broadly based coalitions altogether.

And this appears to be extending to the segment that is even more hostile towards the old left-wing elite than LMP, i.e. the newly surging civil movements. You could hardly call the January 2 demonstration an exercise in harmony, but its most important feature was nevertheless that for the first time the entire left-wing opposition protested together, and the obligatory exercises in bashing the existing political arm of said opposition was subdued and nigh insignificant as compared to the verbal clobbering the speakers and demonstrators had in store for Orbán and Fidesz.

Good or bad for Fidesz?

From Fidesz' vantage point one may argue that the increased pace of rapprochement among the players of the left-wing opposition, which has obviously made many of those involved feel uneasy about their newfound allies, will only serve to reveal the new political players from LMP all the way to 4K! as merely novel manifestations or satellites of the reviled old left. Pushing these players together before they are themselves ready for an alliance will serve to discredit those movements with the greatest potential to attract the masses of disaffected voters craving a new and unspoiled force.

Moreover, the demonstrations also give the impression that even if they ultimately can fulfil their impatient craving for Orbán's removal, they might benefit from the fact that they are unable to do so immediately: even their combined level of popular support is too low, and even in their rejection of Fidesz they are still far too disunited to make a workable electoral co-operation fruitful (not to mention a joint governance, which might make the short-lived Slovakian anti-Fico multiparty coalition seem a success by comparison) .

If early elections were called any time in the near future, the left-wing opposition might be able to close ranks, but they would certainly benefit from more time to approach the alliance issue strategically, and also to winnow the abundant field of new players. Still, for all the solace Fidesz can take in the obvious weakness of its disjointed opposition, it might also take note that co-operation within the multifarious left is possible, and that Fidesz is the main agent for catalysing such co-operation.