

An anti-European campaign in the making

Fidesz has made no secret of its growing dislike of the European Union and especially its representatives. Viviane Reding is only the most recent high profile target in a long series of attacks on the EU and some of its leading politicians. Fidesz needs certain faces to attach to its anti-Europeanism at a time when the invocation of nebulous international forces attacking Hungary is emerging as key mobilising notion for the 2014 campaign.

It's probably not a good idea to get on Fidesz's wrong side when Hungary's governing is in campaign mode. Even at its most relaxed, Fidesz's propaganda machinery is not known for its subtlety and finesse, but with an election pending it's more like a swarm of sharks with a scent. To said sharks, European Commissioner for Justice Viviane Reding must seem like a tasty appetiser en route to the main course due next spring.

Why her, why now?

Reding has angered the Hungarian right with her repeatedly expressed concerns over Fidesz's handling of constitutional amendments, especially in the context of the massive fourth amendment (discussed in detail in our March edition). In an unusually sharp rebuke for an EU official, Reding told the Austrian daily *Der Standard* that "[t]he state of law is not to be trifled with. A constitution is not a toy that one can change every few months."

Reding is of course only the latest among a series of Fidesz's critics at the European level, and actually by far from the harshest. Reding enters an arena whose previous and current combatants include Daniel-Cohn Bendit, Martin Schulz, Guy Verhofstadt and the young Portuguese Green politician Ruy Tavares. In fact, even within the Commission Reding is not to first to engage Fidesz: European Commissioner for Digital Agenda Neelie Kroes had criticised the Hungarian government over the media law. Her public tiff with Minister of Justice Tibor Navracsics, in which they mutually accused each other of lying, was also highly publicised in Hungary.

Ambitions abound

There is ample speculation that in addition to her genuine substantial concerns over the constitutional amendments, Reding also seeks to further her own political ambitions by pillorying Hungary's transgressions. Reding allegedly wishes to be a contender to succeed José Manuel Barroso as the President of the European Commission, and needs issues to endear herself with the left-wing in the EU, who do not consider her a natural ally because of her EPP membership.

Moreover, the entire Commission supposedly likes the idea of expanding the Commission's powers to enforce democratic standards, with new instruments somewhere between the soft proceedings for failure to fulfil an obligation and the extreme Article 7 suspension procedures. By continually testing even the patience of its allies within the EPP, Fidesz might provide the right argument for precisely such a power grab.

Fidesz and its enemies: like fish and water

If any of these apply, then this is a situation of a symbiotic conflict, wherein both parties benefit from the bogeyman offered by the other. Over the past years, Fidesz has been steadily building up the European Union as an antagonist, by turns as a hapless extension of the wily Hungarian left and as a sinister manifestation of the global liberal conspiracy that cannot abide Hungary's exceedingly successful refutation of the dominant economic model.

In its campaigns, Fidesz has traditionally relied on casting opponents as villains. It is fairly clear now that over the past few years it has added the European Union to the list of enemies that are meant to mobilise the right-wing to re-elect its government in a show of solidarity against the massive international forces that seek to regain control over the country through their left-wing puppets (who - to hell with consistency - are simultaneously themselves crafty puppeteers of the Europeans).

Viviane Grinch and Hungarian unorthodoxy

Such a campaign benefits massively from personalisation, the ability to put faces to the sinister forces seeking to wrest control of the country from the natural repository of the popular will, Fidesz. Even more interesting are actions, hence enter István Lovas, the pro-Fidesz Magyar Nemzet's Brussels correspondent renowned for exposing conspiracies, regardless of whether they exist. Lovas claims to have found out that Reding is organising a campaign to cast doubts on the legitimacy of Fidesz election victory next year. László Surján, a leading member of Fidesz's satellite party, KDNP, was obviously convinced by Lovas reports but not persuaded that Reding was without Hungarian allies in the plot, and thus initially even vowed to file a report with the police charging ex-PM Gordon Bajnai for his involvement in derailing Hungary's democratic process. One wonders at what point Attila Mesterházy, the chair of the Hungarian Socialist Party will begin to feel slighted by his alleged non-involvement.

The right-wing media has great practice in massive and sustained ad hominem attacks on political opponents, and since Viviane Reding has volunteered herself, it has been all too glad to add her to the list of people to try to tear down. We noted above that this was a symbiotic conflict as it helps both parties rally support; this is all the more true since both parties can do fairly little to hurt one another. The Fidesz orchestrated attacks on Reding in the Hungarian right-wing media presumably won't sway many undecideds if she were to run for president of the Commission, while Reding offers hypothetical threats in the name of an organisation that does not have much in the way of potential real ones.

Wanted: powerful pretend-enemies

Adding Europe and specific European players to the plot makes sense. Both by virtue of their temperament and the fact that they are in opposition, neither Attila Mesterházy nor Gordon Bajnai - for now the only persons with even a theoretical shot at actually ousting Fidesz - do

not make for sufficiently convincing evil masterminds, which is why Bilderberg-attending eurocrats are ideal supplements to the steadily expanding list of Hungary's enemies.

Of course, while the Fidesz media seeks to evoke an impression that Hungary's enemies are powerful, its anti-European strategy attests to the toothlessness of the Commission. It makes for such a comfy target because for the time being it lacks any disciplining instruments that are neither feeble nor inconceivably extreme. It must also be noted that even though Fidesz's attacks on the EU are unusually vituperous, the Hungarian right is by no means the only political force in Europe that uses the EU as a punching bag. The EU's faults, real and perceived, are the subjects of contentious debate in much of Europe right now.

Not all for show

Still, the anti-European rhetoric is not devoid of any substance. For one, it is true that Fidesz's policies have diverged from the European mainstream in many areas, in some crucial segments of economic policy and especially when it comes to democracy and the rule of law. The government has also reoriented its foreign policy towards the East, probably not coincidentally seeking new friends in a region with several countries whose economic policies – a kind of oligarchic capitalism with strong government involvement in the economy – and approach towards democracy are closer to what Fidesz has in mind for this “half-Asian lot” (quote Orbán) than cumbersome checks and balances and independent oversight institutions. The current state is still a compromise between the European model that Orbán has repeatedly referred to as outmoded and Fidesz's interpretation of the “Asian model”, but if the rapprochement to Central-Asia proceeds further then the enmity with the EU will become more than a mere campaign prop.