



For now, red sludge proves politically uncontroversial

A first glimpse of the political dimensions of the red sludge disaster suggests that thus far little effort has been made to score political points off the crisis. But unfortunately the tragedy is far from over, and hence its potential political after-effects are also up for grabs...

The government has had far too little time to savour its overwhelming victory on the 3rd. Instead of the torrent of public policy measures we anticipated to be released in the immediate aftermath of the election, the public was faced with a torrent of red sludge engulfing huge parts of western Hungary, causing fatalities and injuries, destroying livelihoods and leading to an unprecedented natural catastrophe whose end is not in sight yet.

True to our name, we will focus on the political dimensions of the disaster, the various aspects of its communication by the government, the opposition and the press. Not to milk it, but rather to investigate whether others have done so. That is not all to imply that either pointing fingers or screaming “I told you so” is generally or even mostly wrong. On the contrary, both for accountability and future reference it is in the public interest to know who messed up and who got things right.

Nevertheless, a thin (and often subjective) line divides a legitimate quest to identify those who should be punished legally – or at the very least become the subject of public opprobrium – from political exploitation. It is not up to us to draw these lines, all we can do here is to analyse the reactions to the crisis.

Even the name of the material that caused of the catastrophe, “red sludge”, offered an unusually facile opportunity to savage MSZP, but thus far it hasn’t caught on and even the blogosphere, normally unabashed when it comes to tasteless political attacks, has proven unusually reserved in exploiting this easy pun.

In fact, though the catastrophe is far from over and its ramifications may haunt the Hungarian political sphere for a while still, the political reactions to date have been remarkably subdued. No doubt the public is still in awe of the formidable destructive power and the as of yet unclear, but already horrific effects of the disaster. Politicians probably correctly figure that any aggressive posturing in this atmosphere would only backfire.

Government communication

The government has handled the communication of the catastrophe very professionally thus far (for lack of expertise, we can’t assess the professionalism of its rescue and recovery

efforts, but it is important to point out that no charge suggesting that the authorities are derelict in this regard has been picked up by the media). The “Katrina error”, i.e. the playing-down or ignoring of the problem has been avoided, and the government quickly acknowledged that the responsibility for gaining control of the disaster is its own, thus avoiding the “BP oil spill error”, i.e. the US administration’s reluctance to intercede in the efforts to stop the spill. While White House spokesman Robert Gibbs opined several weeks into the BP crisis that “they [i.e. BP] have the technical expertise to plug the hole. It is their responsibility,” Orbán said that “we do not want to make protective measures and damage control dependent on the co-operation of the implicated enterprises, there is nothing to bargain about with them.”

The government also did not make reckless promises regarding either the potential effects or the clean-up. Politicians routinely have to eat their words when they make overly optimistic pronouncements in such contexts. Instead, the government noted early on that if the red sludge were to reach the Danube its impact would be worse still, and, by implication, acknowledged that though it tried to be on top of things there were factors beyond its control.

If anything, the government was playing it safe by immediately emphasising the unprecedented scope of the disaster – at a time when this was far from obvious for the casual observer. It also quickly moved to focus the communication of the disaster-response on key governmental figures, primarily Minister of the Interior Sándor Pintér, but also Defence Minister Csaba Hende, and lately the PM as well. In addition to quickly setting up both a Hungarian and English portal to track the catastrophe and the disaster response, the government placed the red sludge at the forefront of its communication, while inevitably other political and policy issues have taken a backseat.

An area in which the government’s communication was harsh – though not unreasonably – and potentially overly optimistic was the attack on those thought responsible, and the concomitant promise to render justice. Experience shows that this is traditionally a difficult issue and enforcement usually falls short, either because of the lack of political resolve or the slowly grinding mills of justice (and most often a combination of the two). Nevertheless, the PM has made clear that this time justice would prevail and the social costs would be borne by those accountable.

The corporate malfeasance at the root of the disaster offers an ideal target for a government party that has often railed against the MSZP’s ties to the “oligarchy” – rather hypocritically, given the overabundance of extremely rich entrepreneurs in and near the current government – and liked to refer to the previous cabinet as the “banker-government.” Only an MNC would have offered a more favourable target.

In fact, the most emotional and indignant government reaction thus far came in response to an astonishingly tone-deaf remark by one of the implicated corporate actors, who suggested



that the red sludge was not harmful and could be simply washed off with a hose. If it is harmless, Pintér retorted, then the businessman ought to take a swim in it.

The opposition sees no role for itself

The opposition has also recognised that this early in the crisis there is only a limited role for it to play. Jobbik has probably been the most active, its reactions ranging from collecting donations to emphasising one of its pet issues, accountability. The party seeks to set up a parliamentary investigation committee and has organised a protest in front of MAL Zrt., which is responsible for the red sludge. The unofficial portal of the extreme right party's own internal extreme right, *kuruc.info* handled the issue with its usual approach: it published the phone numbers of MAL Zrt.'s owners urging its frequently unhinged readers to call them.

LMP might benefit from this issue in the future, when it pushes for environmental regulation aimed at preventing such and similar disasters, but for now the party's reaction is best characterised by the attitude of an anonymous MP, who told the weekly *HVG* that such a tragedy should not be exploited to "embarrass other parties" or even to advance one's own agenda. Instead, especially the first period should focus only on rescue and assistance.

For most of the first days after the disaster commenced, MSZP's reaction could be summed up in much the same way. Recently, however, MSZP has emerged as the first opposition party to criticise the government on some aspects of the issue. Chairman Attila Mesterházy has expressed his appreciation for the government's open communication regarding the crisis, but at the same time he also noted his frustration with the government's point man on the environment, junior minister Zoltan Illés. Illés had warned that the catastrophe might become worse because another dam might break. Mesterházy argued that inciting panic was the worst thing an official could do at this time and called on Illés to resign.

A former PM and his company in the crossfire

Let's turn to the elephant in the room. The red sludge that caused the disaster is a residue from the creation of aluminium-oxide, the material once produced by the company that provides a significant part of the wealth of former PM and Fidesz' arch-nemesis Ferenc Gyurcsány. Gyurcsány's company MOTIM has business ties to the corporation that is behind the disaster, and what makes the situation potentially even more precarious for Gyurcsány is that MOTIM itself has been the subject of warnings regarding its red sludge disposal practices.

Unsurprisingly, parts of the media have picked up on the association. What may be a bit more surprising is that though not all media organs have made this an issue, some decidedly left-wing outlets have decided to harp on it as well, which is unusual in a setting where party

interests often dominate reporting priorities. Left-wing *Népszava* published one of the most detailed articles exploring MOTIM's related problems – talking at length about the company without mentioning Gyurcsány, however –, which might be taken as indication of intra-left-wing divisions.

Ultimately, however, the issue has failed to gain traction, and unless new evidence is unearthed the reason appears to be that there is not much to go on in terms of implicating MOTIM or Gyurcsány himself. Gergely Huth of the right-wing daily *Magyar Nemzet* (MN) had already attacked Gyurcsány and MOTIM on account of the waste disposal and red sludge issue back in 2006. But the article itself claimed that the company's fault lied in acting far slower in constructing safe deposits for the red sludge than it had initially pledged. Huth argued that instead of 1997, it took MOTIM until 2001 to finish the process.

But either way, if anything the article now makes MOTIM look good by comparison and may partly explain why *MN Online* – usually not one to miss an opportunity to attack Gyurcsány – has left the former PM and MOTIM alone.

Issues still up for grabs

For the time being, it is unlikely that this issue will emerge as a major source of inter-party communication warfare. Clearly, communication benefits will be reaped from this at the expense of the corporate villains. At the same time, there is of course also the possibility that a) the government will commit major errors in its disaster relief efforts; b) subsequent investigations will reveal some gross regulatory oversight or corruption that will leave one side – in that case most likely the previous government – open to attacks. Furthermore, once the issue will cease to be as sensitive as it is now, it is likely to be used to buttress demands for environmental safety measures and anti-business rhetoric. Whatever the future brings, however, the one positive effect of the disaster has clearly been that it – at least for a little while – toned down political attacks and forced a bit of national unity in a deeply polarised political culture.