

On education, a disunited System of National Unity

On education policy, a new front opens up between parts of Fidesz and KDNP. With Fidesz' former education minister Zoltán Pokorni launching a frontal assault on Christian Democratic education policy, the key question is whether Pokorni is just an old-timer with little to lose or whether he remains a well-connected figure whose pronouncements mark a warning to the KDNP's ambitious education policy-maker Rózsa Hoffmann that she can't set the course alone.

It is still not clear in how far the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) is a genuinely independent political organisation rather than the extended arm of Fidesz, and in particular KDNP's patron and de facto leader, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

KDNP has a rich and illustrious history, starting with determined opposition to both the fascist and the communist dictatorships and re-emerging as one of the smaller opposition parties during the time of regime transition. During the 1990s it was - like many other transition parties – riven with internecine conflicts over a variety of issues.

By the end of the 90s the most important question was whether KDNP should persist as an independent entity or whether it ought to link its future to the emerging hegemon on the right, Fidesz. Following the party's disintegration and its reawakening by former and new KDNP politicians within Fidesz, the issue was decisively resolved with the victory of the latter camp.

Encouraged by Orbán, KDNP was re-established as an auxiliary force in Fidesz' political machinery, allowing – unusually for a political party –, for example, dual membership with Fidesz (Orbán himself mused publicly that he would apply for KDNP membership). In a variety of areas, KDNP is showing increasing signs of political independence, however.

From the outside, it is often difficult to determine which of the “conflicts light” between Fidesz and KDNP are real and which are staged or blown out of proportion to showcase KDNP's independence.

Two distinct divisions this week appeared real, though. The less noticed one was that the candidate favoured by both Fidesz and the KDNP leadership, junior minister Bence Rétvári, failed in his bid to become KDNP's Budapest chair. The local politician who emerged victorious favours a more independent KDNP. While isolated incidents such as this hardly a trend make, they show subtle signs of old intra-party fault lines resurfacing.



Clashing over education

The other conflict was over education policy, where the junior minister for education, KDNP's Rózsa Hoffmann – in the absence of a separate ministry, Hoffmann is the highest official specifically in charge of education –, unveiled the government's programme for the reform of higher education.

An unexpected attack among the relatively wide range of criticisms came from Fidesz elder statesman and former education minister, Zoltán Pokorni. Pokorni appeared to vent several months of pent up frustration and in spite of the occasional qualifiers, his criticism was neither reserved nor limited: he said he could only hope that Hoffmann's policy would not serve to reverse previous progress in education policy.

He also noted that in spite of being the chairman of the Parliament's education committee (and Fidesz' most senior education expert), he had absolutely no influence over education policy, which Hoffmann had not in any way coordinated with him. The latter charge suggests that Fidesz parliamentarians as such are left out of the process.

Much of the conflict might be resolved later, since for now the proposal is only a draft whose purpose is precisely to kick-start a series of discussions that will result in the new general framework of higher education, which will then be further fleshed out by government decrees in the years to come.

If the differences are fundamental and concern the general orientation of education policy rather than specific details, however, and are now burdened with a public rift to boot, then they will be difficult to bridge.

It is not unusual for the more powerful government party to cede control over entire policy areas to its smaller partner. The liberal party SZDSZ also controlled education policy until 2006, and was responsible for the previous major reform in education. Nor are conflicts between coalition partners unusual, especially when the smaller party seeks changes that the latter is reluctant to enact.

Not only was the Fidesz-KDNP relationship supposed to be different, however, but a failure to consult entirely, followed by public recriminations, appears to be (in this particular policy area) the sign of troubled co-operation rather than the beginning of a fresh start into a whole new era.

The reforms in brief

Given that Pokorni did not go into details, we don't know how he feels about the specific proposals and what aspects of Hoffmann's reform he will want to renegotiate. Here are some of the issues that experts have raised (a detailed analysis of the package in light of

Fidesz' previous communication about education is available in Hungarian on Policy Solutions' webpage):

Funding criteria: The proposal centralises large segments of university funding and replaces a fairly objective - if not overly fortunate - disbursement criterion with whatever the government will see fit at any given point. Currently funding is contingent on student numbers, which many critics rightly lamented compelled universities to draw students without regard to their ability to handle them.

While the old system lacked meaningful quality control, the new system makes no promise to tie funding to quality, nor does it seek to establish any objective or generally acknowledged criteria for funding. This makes not only the opposition but also independent experts uneasy that the actual distribution of funding will partially occur on a political basis. While student numbers are a crude basis for doling out money, the lack of transparent criteria harbours the risk of arbitrariness.

As anticipated, there has been no movement towards trying to bring private funds into the higher education system.

Student numbers and quality: There is some debate in Hungary as to whether tertiary education churns out too many students will little useful skills at all. Hungary is fairly strong in terms of the number of students in higher education, but many of the institutions that provide training offer subpar education and are little more than diploma factories.

Nevertheless, in line with the recently adopted European guidelines for tertiary education, which seek to raise the proportion of the European population with tertiary education degrees from 31% to 40% by 2020, the new programme promises to offer tuition-free spots in higher education programmes to roughly 45% of all those 18 years and older.

At the same time, this won't be easy. With their funding separated from the number of students, universities will be less eager to draw in as many students as they can, especially since at the same time potentially more onerous requirements on the number of faculty employed, student/teacher ratios and on the ratio of faculty with scientific degrees could significantly increase per student outlays.

Though the latter requirements could signal a move towards improving the quality of higher education, it is unclear where the funding for the targets set out in the proposal would come from.

Bologna: In the previous electoral term, Hoffmann was critical of the Bologna process, faulting its "hasty and general" implementation in Hungary. Despite her repeatedly voiced dissatisfaction with Bologna's effect on Hungarian tertiary education, at this point the document only presents a non-committal promise to review the Bologna process in Hungary, with the possibility that in some institutions and/or in some fields of education the BA/MA system will be abandoned. Those who feared that some kind of serious effort would

commence to undermine Hungary's integration into the European education system can relax for now. Though this is not a guarantee for the future, the odds are still that Hungary will remain respectful of her policy commitments in this area and also won't hinder students' ability to easily continue and complement their studies elsewhere.

An activist island in a peaceful ocean

Whatever one may think of the contents of Rózsa Hoffmann's policies – and for the most part we share the concerns voiced by Pokorni, education experts and the opposition – what must be admitted is that not only is she heading one of the few areas of government that is actually doing something, but also that she makes strong ideological statements that offer other politicians and the public a worldview that they can debate and choose to endorse or reject.

We have noted this before, but it bears repetition: the government that prides itself on having done more in its first couple of months than any of the previous governments has in fact done very little apart from amending the constitution to further its power and taking control of independent institutions.

Another critical problem was/is the lack of a real campaign promises and agenda transparency. To hold politicians democratically accountable, citizens must know what politicians plan to do and if they do it. With Fidesz, voters were mostly groping in the dark when they brought it into office and have received little clarity since then.

Education policy was no exception, it hardly merited any discussion in the Fidesz-KDNP election platform. Since then, however, Hoffmann has emerged as one of the few government politicians who show clear contours for her fellow politicians and voters to judge. This will make her the target of more policy-based attacks than other members of the government, but at least there is something to debate.

There also ominous signs, however, that Hoffmann is not keen on debate. If Pokorni is right and she failed to coordinate even with experienced policy experts within her own government coalition, then there is little reason to believe that she will seriously consider the concerns of outside experts, not to mention the opposition of whose ideas she is occasionally openly scornful.

The question now is whether Pokorni, whose positions shows considerable signs of estrangement from the party leadership, wields enough influence within Fidesz to steer Hoffmann's reform plans in a direction that he finds is more in line with the needs of a modern Hungary.