

## Fighting for Hungarian votes in Strasbourg

*The prime minister's appearance in Strasbourg to introduce the Hungarian rotating presidency of the European Union yielded mixed results. From the government's perspective, it is likely that what we posit was the overall goal – i.e. appealing to the Fidesz base at home without causing a serious backlash in Strasbourg – was achieved. At the same time, the government did face very public and open criticism of both the media law and its activities in general. And Orbán's response was not suitable for soothing critics and inspiring hope that the phase of conflict with his European counterparts is over.*

Both the expectations and the fears surrounding the prime minister's visit to Strasbourg were high. Many of those friendly towards the government within Hungary had hoped that Orbán would be able to put what they consider an overwrought brouhaha over the media law to rest, and manage to reorient attention to the strategic objectives the Hungarian EU presidency seeks to achieve. Those on other hand who are more concerned with Hungarian-EU relations – some opposed to the government, some sympathetic to it –, as well as many EU officials - who are worried that a bitter conflict might overshadow the entire Union business in the coming months –, were fearful that the prime minister's appearance in Strasbourg might inflame passions rather than appease them.

Orbán's stance in Strasbourg, while combative, was less belligerent than some feared or suggested afterwards. The truth is that Orbán is rarely himself very combative – that task is usually delegated to persons lower on the totem pole. Seen from that perspective, however, his second, reactive speech in Strasbourg was at time strikingly pugnacious.

### Two speeches, two Orbáns

Orbán's first speech was decent, even excellent at points, both in terms of delivery and content. This was Orbán the statesman. While this is necessarily a subjective view, we believe that in particular with regard to jobs and debt the prime minister's speech was spot-on and very insightful. Especially his statement on the latter reflects a keen understanding of what appears to be Hungary's greatest problem and liability, i.e. its alarmingly low rate of employment. However, understanding a problem and its importance and doing the right thing to address it are clearly distinct issues. While there are now signs that the government might undertake some genuine measures to do address the chronic deficit production problem, how they want to handle the low employment rate is still not clear.

A somewhat odd feature of his first speech – and an early indication of the direction of the latter speech – was his not so veiled threat that if Hungarian domestic politics becomes an issue for the EU than the Union itself would emerge as the loser from the conflict. That is probably true. As the precedents have generally shown, the Union has very little to gain and a lot to lose when it dabbles in the internal affairs of a member country. Such moves provide ammunition to euro-sceptics populist parties who will present the interventions as evidence of the EU's aspiration to act as a superstate. No wonder the EP's enfant terrible, Nigel Farage, was egging Orbán on, presumably in the hope of pouring oil onto the fire. Nevertheless, Orbán's threatening tone could have been construed as, well, threatening.

## Harsh reactions and a harsh response

The reactions were pretty much as Orbán might have anticipated. Some sympathetic words from Orbán's own party, the European People's Party, and harsh attacks especially from social democrats, greens and liberals. A somewhat interesting reaction was the conciliatory tone of Lothar Bisky, president of the far-left GUE/NGL group, as well as of two MSZP speakers, Csaba Tabajdi and Edit Herczog, with the latter completely ignoring the media law issue and focusing on energy policy instead. It seems that Hungarian socialists have realised both in Hungary and in the EP that the criticisms against the media law would be more efficient if the sources of these attacks are not the still unpopular MSZP, but other bodies. An especially strong condemnation of Orbán's general policies and the media law came from the Green Party group chairman Daniel Cohn-Bendit. But still, while his emotional delivery is likely to stick in most viewers' minds, there were sharper attacks than his on Wednesday.

When Orbán rose to respond, he did not mince words either. Pointing out that he would first respond in his position as Hungarian prime minister (as opposed to his position as rotating EU president), he did exactly that, which is to say he gave a tough campaign speech. This was Orbán the anti-left warrior. In stark terms he rejected what he classified as attacks against Hungary overall, while conceding that criticising the media law was perfectly all right and a legitimate subject of discussion.

## Hungary or its government under attack?

We take issue with this statement for two reasons. First, no one, not even the critics in the EP attacked Hungary. In fact, many of those who rose to speak made sure to express their sympathy, on occasion even admiration for Hungary. Our second contention is that the government has thus far shown very little inclination to accept criticism of the media law, and absolutely none before the international media and the EU raised a ruckus.

There is an interesting side debate in domestic circles as to whether Orbán's response was spontaneous and whether his occasionally palpable indignation was genuine. His response was clearly scripted, as evidenced by the fact that he followed his prepared statement and that he repeated some of the panels verbatim in the subsequent press conference. As for his indignation, there is no clear evidence either way – unless one acknowledges that it is unlikely that he could regain his composure quite as quickly as he did during the speech when turned to technical issues – but our hunch is that it was planned, too. And just to make this clear: such important speeches are near universally scripted, as they should be, and as far as the dramatic element is concerned – it's what politicians of all stripes often simply do.

## A difficult balance handled passably

Though he was clearly aware of the delicate balancing act required of him – i.e. not to offend the EU and not to appear weak either –, especially in his latter speech he was clearly less

concerned with the Strasbourg audience than with the public at home. He is not unusual in this regard. As parliamentary speeches in general are usually geared towards the wider public audience rather than the colleagues in the chamber, Orbán's Strasbourg appearance, too, was aimed mostly at his electorate in Hungary and not at those outraged over the media law nor at those whose primary concern was laying the issue to rest and ensuring a smooth Hungarian presidency.

Clearly, the difficulty was that handling these parallel requirements – that is placating Strasbourg/Brussels and satisfying the Fidesz camp which wants to see its prime minister stand tall – was impossible. So Orbán made a clear choice and sought to impress voters at home. Ours may be a small country, he was saying, but it's on par with other European countries and we will not be bullied. Incidentally, the first survey results indicate that his strategy might have paid off: despite the recent controversies and weeks of conflicts over the media law, Fidesz retains its commanding lead in public opinion polls.

## **The real agenda of the presidency is still up for grabs**

The one risk for Orbán is clearly that by choosing not to placate his adversaries by espousing a softer tone, he has made it more likely that open rows will overshadow his EU presidency, either in the context of the media law or regarding other issues. There are likely to be a few people in the EP now who will exploit other opportunities for conflict.

If Orbán wants to avoid this, he'd best refrain from inflammatory domestic policy actions in the coming six months. This would have been prudent in any case, but having left a fair number of antagonised opponents in Strasbourg/Brussels, it would be in his – and also Hungary's – best interest not to give reasons for further attacks. A crucial question in this regard will be the adoption of the new constitution, which is scheduled to take place during the Hungarian presidency.

While he emphasises that it is up to sinister left-wing forces whether the EU will be able to focus on key public policy issues under the Hungarian presidency, the truth is that in no small part it is up to Orbán himself. If he undertakes controversial measures in the coming weeks and months, then he, too, will help hijack the otherwise uncontroversial policy agenda.