



Dual citizenship at its logical conclusion

Politically, Fidesz stands to gain a lot by giving suffrage to newly minted Hungarian citizens across the border. Still, the opposition will be in a tough spot because Fidesz is right to argue that generally speaking, citizenship does not tend to be decoupled from suffrage. Extending suffrage to all citizens is usually seen as a democracy-enhancing measure and several European countries have extended the right to vote to their respective Diaspora in the past couple of years.

A mere month after adopting the law allowing for dual citizenship of Hungarians across the borders, Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén already made clear that the government would attempt to give the new citizens the right to vote as well. In an interview with the Hungarian-language paper *Krónika* in Transylvania, the KDNP politician remarked that “citizenship and suffrage are inseparable”. (Just to be clear: citizens have the right to vote even if they are abroad, but to do so, they must have a legal residence in Hungary. Extending suffrage in this context means either abolishing this requirement or relaxing it in some form for dual citizens.)

Semjén’s remarks last summer were clearly a trial balloon, which was followed by several others, none of which elicited significant reactions in the public. At the same time, the statement was also clearly more than just musing aloud, but rather an announcement of the government’s intention. While such clear talk would have been welcome prior to the vote in parliament, when Fidesz essentially ignored the issue of voting rights, Semjén’s promise made clear to all but the most obtuse that the question with regard to the suffrage of citizens across the borders would be only a question of how. The “if” issue had been settled.

Slow but massive and enduring enthusiasm

Fidesz came comparatively late to the dual citizenship issue. Analysts with insight into the Fidesz-apparatus claim that the first referendum in 2004, brought by the World Federation of Hungarians (MVSZ), caught the Fidesz leadership off-guard and that it took them a while to latch onto the issue. Fidesz had been supportive of dual citizenship in general but had not pushed strongly for it. But once Fidesz made the question its own, it became a solid supporter of the cause and considered the failure of the proposition – on account of insufficient participation, since the “yes” votes narrowly prevailed – a travesty.

And it was clear that for Fidesz this was both ideologically and tactically a winning proposition: though there is no consensus as to its degree, there is near universal agreement that the Hungarian minorities living in the neighbouring countries favour the right-wing in Hungary far more than the left-wing. This tendency was only reinforced by the respective

positions of the political parties in 2004, when the right campaigned hard for dual citizenship while MSZP cautiously and SZDSZ clearly campaigned for rejecting dual citizenship.

A politically opportune move

Among right-wing politicians it was former Health Minister István Mikola who most openly formulated the stake of this issue. In a speech to the Fidesz party congress in March 2006, shortly before the pending elections, Orbán's then favourite Fidesz politician remarked: "Because if we can win a four year [term] and could then, say, give the five million Hungarians citizenship, and they could vote – it would decide everything in this country for 20 years". Though it was not as bad as his other campaign gaffe criticising young people, this too must have been an "Oops, did I really just say that?" moment.

Which didn't make it any less true. Though five million appears to be a gross overestimation of the number of Hungarians across the border (2,5-3 million appears more realistic), and clearly not everyone will apply for citizenship or vote, even in 2006 it was fairly apparent that even a few hundred thousand extra votes would cement Fidesz' position as the dominant party. To wit, since the party system had become bifurcated into a right and left-wing bloc in the 1990s, until 2010 the maximum spread between the right and left camps had peaked at slight over two hundred thousand votes, while the margins dropped to under 150 thousand in 2002 and 2006 (if you include votes cast for the extreme right MIÉP).

A balance unhinged forever?

Already in 2006 it seemed likely that adding even a few hundred thousand mostly right-wing voters would upset this balance and – at least for a while – render the alternation in power difficult. Since then, however, Fidesz has ceased to have a clear alternative with MSZP losing ground so massively that it polled barely more than a third of Fidesz' total last April. Adding a few hundred thousand of likely Fidesz-voters into this mix would appear to turn the difficult task of ousting Fidesz into an outright impossible one.

Especially so since unlike residents, these voters would not even suffer from most of the mistakes made or bad policies adopted by the government. If for instance the economy were to flounder seriously or the government were to introduce a tax hike or some other painful measure, those voters living across our borders would not feel the pain. In effect then, many voters would cast their verdict over a government whose policies are mainly directed at another group.



Still, Semjén is right

Nevertheless, Semjén is right in stating that citizenship and the right to vote tend to go hand in hand. The opposition supported giving Hungarians across the border citizenship and arguably citizenship is no more than an empty formula devoid of meaning without certain rights and obligations, and in particular the right to vote.

With the extension of suffrage to all adult citizens, the presumption is in general in favour of everyone's right to vote. If therefore a significant proportion of the citizenry is deprived of suffrage, then "they won't vote for us" is certainly not a strong argument for upholding this practice. And certainly the opposition – which near unanimously supported extending citizenship – could be legitimately asked what real rights they sought to confer on Hungarians across the borders if they deny them the fundamental right of democratic participation.

This is also one area where the opposition won't be able to lambast Fidesz for its anti-democratic measures, since European democratic practice doesn't counsel against extending suffrage either. Italy, France and Portugal are among the countries that let citizens residing abroad vote. Of course, in these countries the foreign residents wield comparatively less electoral clout than they could in Hungary, if they are given full and unqualified suffrage.

Reasonable compromise

That leaves as the strongest argument against full suffrage the concern that the move would reduce democratic accountability because potentially a significant proportion of the electorate would not actually be affected by the government's policies. There are ways to tackle this problem reasonably.

For example, following a common practice Hungarians abroad might be assigned a fixed allotment of seats that would not constitute a significant proportion of the total seats in parliament. While even with a few seats Hungarians abroad could potentially tip the scale towards Fidesz in a close election, such an event is rather unlikely. One might also establish an upper chamber of parliament with consultative powers and reserve seats for citizens abroad there. Finally, one might even give them representation, but without the right to vote in parliament (if you think that's unfair, ask the citizens of Washington, D.C. – well, that is actually unfair). While these solutions, too, would constitute discrimination, this differentiation would arguably be fair and acceptable in light of the overall context.