



A fair weather opposition?

The demonstrations of March 15th were above all an opportunity to demonstrate strength. As was expected, Fidesz succeeded. Surprisingly, the left-of-centre opposition displayed impressive strength in the streets for the first time in years. As of yet, this opposition is not willing to align itself politically, as is apparent by the scarce attendance at the rallies of the two left-wing parliamentary opposition parties. For the time being, this is probably the best way to organise a disaffected left-wing electorate. But in terms of achieving political change, the model comes with an expiration date.

An aesthetic issue

Much of the blogosphere - where young people these days get a significant proportion of their information from - was awash with an amusing story broken by the news portal Origo: 500 young people, apparently a fair number of them politically indifferent, were paid the minor sum of some 2000 forints to attend the Prime Minister's festive speech at the occasion of the anniversary of the 1848 revolution, and to stand on the stairs of the National Museum surrounding Orbán.

That the taxpayer would have to foot the bill, however minor, for people applauding the Prime Minister was irritating but also intriguing: why did Fidesz think this would be necessary in the first place? Numbering some 20.000, participation at the event was massive, easily surpassing similar events in earlier years and reflecting the Prime Minister's still vast and devoted fan base. We can only speculate and our hunch is that the organisers assumed the crowd of young faces was aesthetically more pleasing than a cross-section of participants would have been.

While it is true, as a right-wing comment noted, that young people could be doing a lot worse with their time than listen to their PM talk, one has to wonder whether paying them for it is the best way to achieve the superior choice of time commitment. As scandals rank, this is clearly relatively minor. Apart from the ethically questionable use of taxpayers' money, however, there is also the suspicion - to date not allayed - that the money was paid out without documentation. That would be even less acceptable for an undertaking sponsored by the government.

A pugnacious speech

The Prime Minister rewarded those in attendance with a brief speech that nevertheless covered vast ground, spanning a century and a half of history. He offered harsh critiques of MSZP, private pension funds and the sinister forces lined up against Hungary abroad but organised and controlled from here. While the IMF only got a comment implying "good riddance", the EU was subjected to a crude and unfair metaphor: just as Hungary had previously rejected domination by imperial Vienna and Moscow, it would not be told what to do by Brussels today. In concocting this mental image suggesting a continuity between the three regimes, the PM generously glossed over the fact that Brussels is not a dictatorship/absolutist monarchy occupying Hungary, nor has it butchered masses of Hungarians to thwart our independence. This is probably not how those holding the rotating presidency of the European Union generally tend to think of the organisation they temporarily lead.

The PM, however, was once again most concerned about the domestic audience and, above all his speech was a piece of electioneering. He used the festive occasion to tear into the Socialist Party, tying it to foreign powers and reminding the audience of the indisputable link between the left-wing opposition and the dictatorship.

Orbán also continues to reinforce the notion of the lost two decades in a twilight zone of transition, which had failed to fulfil its promise and left everything “unfinished”. The core of Orbán’s aspiration, of the “revolution in the voting booth”, the new constitution and many other acts large and small is not only or even primarily to establish Fidesz as a “central power” and to cement its ruling position for the next 15-20 years; it is to lay the foundation to a whole new era and Orbán does not miss a single opportunity to buttress this concept rhetorically.

The left-wing opposition

Whether or not Orbán can realise his goals will to a significant degree depend on whether a strong opposition will be able to rise up to him and challenge him in the near future. Incidentally, 15th March was not only a demonstration of strength for Orbán, but also the first time that the hitherto weak and ineffectual opposition - or at least parts of it - was able to rouse some masses.

MSZP drew a crowd that according to Népszabadság’s estimates was even slightly smaller than last year’s, which is fairly disappointing for the largest opposition party that seeks to solidify its position as the main challenger to Fidesz. After months of government blunders and few convincing successes to show for it, the Socialists should ideally be able to mobilise more people – that is if the resentment towards the party were on the decline.

Party Chairman Attila Mesterházy also gave a combative speech. His choice of words was similarly radical as Orbán’s: he spoke of a constitutional coup d’etat that Fidesz was conducting. This was a harsh attack, but like Orbán’s it contained nothing new: the Socialists have been saying this for months now, to little avail in terms of persuading the public. The leader of the PES group in the European Parliament, Martin Schultz helped fire up the crowd, but he was not the most prominent foreign guest in Budapest that day and he, too, could not help disguise the fact that for now MSZP is not the locus of the anti-Fidesz opposition.

If MSZP lacked vitality, LMP was disappointing: at the geographical centre of its support it drew only a tiny crowd. LMP may continue to seek solace in the notion that it can mobilise when it matters – during elections – but while this may work for a party that ekes out an existence near the five percent threshold necessary to enter parliament, it won’t do for a party that aspires to more.

Where has all the opposition gone?

What is especially bitter for the parliamentary opposition is that its own weakness stands in stark contrast with the civic sphere’s capability to attract a resurgent anti-government sentiment in what was the greatest left-of-centre demonstration in years. Tuesday’s



gathering was the third in the series of demonstrations began last winter at the initiative of a Facebook-based civic group that seeks to protest Fidesz' media law.

The demonstrations had robust attendance already during the winter, but the good weather appears to have benefited the public display of anti-government sentiments as well: tens of thousands came to watch the legendary Polish dissident and journalist Adam Michnik and a few Hungarian celebrities speak. Politicians continue to play no role in this civic process, regardless of what their stance is on the media law.

Increasingly powerful but in flux

The impressive success of the civic demonstration offers three insights. The first is that regardless of the intentions of the organisers – and thus far they have done little to nothing to suggest that they have ulterior motives – for many demonstrators the media law is an immediate cause for expressing overall dissatisfaction with the government. The civic movement is emerging as an extra-parliamentary opposition to the government and as such its demonstrations also serve as a useful gauge for measuring the ability of the anti-government sentiments to mobilise. Which is to say that while the media law may have served as a strong motivating factor, in light of the government's overall course of action this opposition would have been triggered anyway.

Second, much of this opposition is still unwilling to commit itself politically. Many voters feel that MSZP has burnt too many bridges to be in serious consideration for their support (this sentiment may or may not last, but it is still strong), and many don't consider LMP a convincing alternative either. This is a persuasive illustration of the trend that tons of anecdotal evidence also underlines: there is an immense craving in left and liberal circles for a credible political alternative (interestingly, this same craving exists in moderate market-oriented right-wing circles).

Third, while it may be the most suitable form of organisation considering the current state of affairs, the anti-political stance of the opposition cannot persist in the long run. Ultimately, only politicians can repeal the impugned media law. If they want to affect change, those protesting with the civic movement will have to throw their strength behind one party or the other – Fidesz won't be swayed by civil protests. And as long as those opposed to it remain opposed to its potential opponents, Fidesz' political position is fairly secure.