



In the search for lost voters

A growing number of voters refuse to name a party they would support, sending Fidesz and the entire political class a warning message. Fidesz's popularity is reminiscent of a hot-air balloon with a small leak – the helium is gradually oozing out, slowly bringing the balloon from stratospheric heights back towards the ground. The governing party has lost roughly a third of its voters since last May. The trend may still easily be reversed, and there is as of yet no opposition party that is able to reap the benefits of Fidesz's declining support – but as a trend, the government must take this seriously.

Finally, Fidesz's magic appears to be wearing off. In terms of popularity, Fidesz is still by far the strongest among the parliamentary parties and the number of its supporters outweighs the combined figures of the opposition. But outside the parliamentary parties, the party of non-voters is now much larger than the Fidesz-camp, and in fact almost as popular as the entire spectrum of parties combined. According to the latest survey by Szonda-Ipsos, half the population has no preference for either party. Tárki's numbers are only slightly better for the political class.

Though Fidesz's dip in the poll has been remarkable since beginning of the year, what we appear to be witnessing is not one or a few overarching issues bringing the government's popularity down, but rather an ongoing series of political events that cast the government in a bad light and gradually erode its vast popularity.

While Fidesz's numbers among those certain to vote have been remarkably stable for a long time and continue to be strong, the ruling party has over time lost a considerable proportion of its voters to the camp of non-voters. This development had previously failed to attract major attention because it was very incremental and because Fidesz's lost voters did not express support for other parties either, which meant that the government party still remained very strong on the crucial question of "Whom would you vote for if elections were held today?"

Fresh numbers are disappointing

The two polling companies that have already released their numbers for March, Szonda and Tárki, show an overall decline in Fidesz's support among the population at large since last May from 42 to 27 and 45 to 30, respectively. Tárki saw almost half of this decline over the past three months (much like Median, which has not released its March numbers yet), while Szonda saw a more gradual process that slightly picked up pace around the end of last year.

For the first time, Fidesz numbers also declined among those who have a party preference: in Szonda's poll 54% would vote for Fidesz; down from 60%, but still higher than Fidesz's actual election result last year. MSZP and Jobbik are both slightly up, to 23% and 15% (from 20% and 12%), respectively, while LMP still limps around the threshold, though some polls have finally seen it gain some traction. So, altogether, this is still not a major movement for the opposition parties.

A displeasing image at the top

We can only speculate as to what the trends mean and how they constitute the declining popularity of Fidesz. As we noted previously, few of the adverse developments, major controversial acts or scandals appeared to have had much of an impact at the time. Below is a timeline of such events and Fidesz's popularity in the general population according to the surveys by three major polling companies.

| Time | Event | Median | Szonda | Tárki |
|----------|---|--------|--------|-------|
| May | New government enters office | 50 | 42 | 45 |
| June | Civil servants can be fired without cause | 50 | 41 | 46 |
| | More stringent rules for fielding candidates and party lists in municipal elections | | | |
| | Election of Pál Schmitt as President | | | |
| July | 98% retroactive tax on public service bonuses, severances and other extra payments | 49 | 37 | 39 |
| October | Crisis taxes | 44 | 39 | 44 |
| | Private pension fund contributions temporarily diverted | | | |
| November | Constitutional Court's authority restricted | 44 | 37 | 49 |
| December | Private pension funds nationalised | 44 | 33 | 43 |
| | Fiscal Council is de facto abolished | | | |
| January | Media law | 45 | 34 | 38 |
| February | First post tax cut paychecks arrive | 38 | 31 | 37 |
| March | Szell Kalman plan | NA | 27 | 30 |

Source of the numbers: torokgaborelemezblog.hu

It appeared that none of these made a significant dent in Fidesz's popularity, no matter how much outrage they triggered in the left-wing opposition, the intelligentsia or foreign observers. But in addition to chipping away a percent or two, they may have – and this is speculative – increasingly corroborated an image of Fidesz as it is portrayed by the opposition: a party that is autocratic, on the quest for total control, vengeful, out of touch, arrogant and not genuinely concerned with the plight of the poor, in fact occasionally openly disdainful of them.

If the latter charge sticks, it will hurt Fidesz more badly than any of the other ones. While checks and balances and independent review of the government may not resonate deeply with voters, social sensibilities are key in a society that is deeply distrustful of wealth and prefers a state that shoulders social responsibilities – something that is fairly hard without empathy for the poor.

Et tu, flat tax?

Fidesz probably made a mistake in advertising loudly how its tax cut would benefit everyone, and now many people are discovering that not only does it fail to do so, but that in fact it benefits those well off inordinately. For citizens, this verifies the charges that Fidesz is both out of touch with the reality of low incomes and also indifferent towards this reality.

Though the clampdown on the substance of the Constitution's welfare commitments (see newsletter 2011/12) is not a nuance most voters are likely to pick up on, the harsh words of Fidesz parliamentary leader János Lázár questioning the value as human beings of those with no wealth, and the reality of rising prices with unchanged or less disposable income for many ordinary folks reinforce the image of social coldness.

Interestingly, Jobbik, which during the early months of the Fidesz-government mostly supported the ruling parties' economic policy, is more critical now, and has lambasted the government on account of the flat tax. It is probable that Jobbik is jumping on a bandwagon started by the two left-wing opposition parties who have for some time now peddled the notion that the government's commitment to social justice is disingenuous.

For lack of an alternative

Still, there is a significant limit as to how bad things can get for Fidesz: as long as there is no effective opposition, voters might become disaffected and at least temporarily withdraw from the political process altogether. But they won't opt for other parties and thus no alternative to Fidesz emerges. Unless the opposition becomes more convincing to voters, Fidesz can easily win elections in which almost half the seats are distributed in single-member constituencies – even a significant loss as compared to its 2010 results wouldn't stop Fidesz from carrying most of the parliamentary constituencies as long as the opposition is fragmented and fails to coalesce around single candidates to challenge the Fidesz incumbents.

Also, there is a possibility that the string of scandals and bad news will gradually ebb and good news for the government will become more common. Fidesz might have gotten all the nasty stuff it felt it needed to do out of the way early on, and if the economy picks up and yields solid growth rates – the big “if” for any government – then by 2013-14 the scandals and controversies of the first few months could be a distant memory and Fidesz could go into the next elections maybe somewhat weaker than in 2014, but still in a sure position to win.

But while neither if these are unrealistic “ifs”, at this point Fidesz appears to be doing little to halt the trend that has sent its former voters into passivity.