



Jobbik: Slapped for success

The times call for an economically populist agenda, and Jobbik appears to be successfully adapting to this requirement. Drawing on a mix of its own xenophobic/anti-globalisation ideas, Fidesz' previous opposition rhetoric, and traditional left-wing ideas, it is steadfastly attacking the government's economic policies. At the same time, a careful process of marginalizing some of the far-right movement's most radical figures has begun. While these have helped push Jobbik to the level of popularity of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Jobbik faces the risk of an ideologically-inspired fragmentation.

Rarely in history has a slap in the face more fortuitously timed than the one Zsolt Tyirityán, leader of the small extremist group Outlaw Army, delivered to Jobbik Vice Chairman Előd Novák. Apparently Novák has recently made a habit of emphasising that he was unhappy with the fact that Tyirityán's group treats prison experience as a badge of honour. Novák argued that this is not compatible with how Jobbik views priors.

When Tyirityán challenged the young politico over his comments and found Novák's explanation wanting, he hit him (Novák appears to be a magnet for public assault – last year the blogger enfant terrible Tamás “Tomcat” Polgár attacked him in the courthouse), thereby unwittingly underlining Novák's point.

The altercation was highly symbolic: a few weeks ago Tyirityán had caused a (surprisingly minor) hue when press reports revealed that at the Hungarian Island Festival – an event where many Jobbik politicians are in attendance – he had primed his enthusiastic audience to be ready to kill people of colour and Jews “without emotionality” during the impending race war.

Jobbik Chairman Vona distanced himself, a highly unusual move. More interestingly, the extremist flagship kuruc.info – which, though to the right of official Jobbik, is generally so obsequious to the party as to give grounds to the often-cited rumour that Novák himself or another Jobbik politician is the editor – has begun turning on the Outlaw Army, defaming its members in the well-worn rhetoric and imagery.

A few months ago we wrote the following about Jobbik (Week 16): “If it wants to retain or improve its electoral position, it must add some well-rounded policy-heft to its single-minded racism and project more seriousness about politics. Moreover, if it harbours such ambitions, it will have to shed some of the more visible clowns because in spite of the electorate's shift to the right, the majority is not ready to give responsible positions to hooligans (the question is whether Gábor Vona would be strong enough to purge some of the more alarming figures among the party's influential informal youth movement – if he so desired, that is).”

Dear Reader: it's on. Jobbik has begun to do both: it is adding policy heft and, though treading very carefully, it is also cleaning house. And its efforts are bearing fruit, cf. Jobbik's

improved standing in the surveys. It has gradually gained ground over the past few months and has now caught the Socialists as the second strongest party in two major polls.

Let's look at policy and the moderate-extremist infighting in turn.

Picking up the pieces

Hard as the government tries to deny it, Fidesz' economic policy is increasingly looking like austerity. Having heard Fidesz assailing the previous governments' austerity measures for years, as well as its insistence that austerity is always unnecessary, disappointed citizens continue to swell the ranks of the undecideds, in the hope of something better than Fidesz coming along.

All three opposition parties are wooing the growing segment of disaffected voters, but thus far Jobbik has been less enthusiastic on this front, focusing more on law & order issues and corruption.

A survey of Jobbik's recent press releases shows that it has fully delved into the socio-economic dimension of politics. It talks of a "budget of austerity based on neo-liberal prescriptions", of extending benefits to those with low incomes, of protecting the average folk, etc. While it has not presented an alternative budget, as LMP has (or promised one, as MSZP has), it is showing every sign that it is taking seriously how citizens feel about the course of economic policy.

More importantly, Jobbik is demonstrating that it has some ideas how it would handle these issues if it were given the reigns of government, even if a lot of its ideas are pure populism, such as the proposal that banks alone swallow the losses stemming from Swiss franc-based mortgages. The radical right party is also employing some of the phraseology that Fidesz previously used against MSZP, such as the reference to a "banker government".

This is not the tone of political moderation, surely. Jobbik still insists that Hungary is governed by sinister international forces and that it is the only true national political movement. But nevertheless, the press releases show that Jobbik is aware of the apprehension that citizens feel over the various painful economic policy measures and is more often willing to skip over the usual far-right hyperbole to address these.

Cracks on the unity front

Lajos Pószé must be smiling. To wit, he was the politician who was removed from Jobbik's parliamentary faction for his immoderate moderation, specifically his efforts to move the party away from the extremist lot. László Toroczkai, former leader of the far-right youth group HVIM (the primary organiser of the Hungarian Island mentioned above) and local-level

Jobbik politician (though not a party member) called for “eradicating such people from our side” with all means available.

Pószte’s removal last December for criticising the Hungarian Guard was a short-lived victory for the extremist wing, as Jobbik’s leadership now appears ready to call out the farthest right in the quest for controlling the party’s course.

Following the assault on Novák, the party presidium quickly called on all persons who are members of both, Jobbik and the Outlaw Army, to choose allegiance, for dual membership would be disallowed. In reality, this is a highly symbolic gesture since only a handful of people are affected. Significantly, kuruc.info also lashed out against László Toroczkai and current HVIM leader György Gyula Zagyva, who had pointedly refused to disassociate themselves from Tyirityán following his outburst at the Hungarian Island.

Zagyva had already been subject to intense internal criticism for staging a demonstration that hindered access to the (more famous) Island Festival (Sziget) – despite its reservations about the event, Jobbik knows better than to actively turn such a beloved event into a subject of its cultural wars. Such nuances are lost on the more extremist members, however.

For Jobbik, fragmentation is a danger

At the moment, this slight crack in Jobbik’s show of unity appears less about ideology than about methods. As a party that wants to stand for law and order, those “hooligans” we referred to a few months ago are becoming increasingly embarrassing, unless they are willing to renounce their hooligan ways. But the move towards an emphasis on social and economic issues is also a subtle ideological shift, for these are the type of issues that party moderates want to push anyway.

For Jobbik, the question has always been and remains how much it can alienate the most extreme parts of its base. Given the intense internal ideological differences, and especially the highly varied sense of extremism, there was always a danger of the splits that are typical of extremist movements anywhere. If one takes a closer look at the movement behind Jobbik, the differences small and large form a panoply worthy of the famous scene in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* when a few disgruntled Jewish rebels seeking to oust the Romans enumerate their visceral hatred of an endless number of Jewish factions seeking the same goal.

It is a testament to the skills of the Jobbik leadership that it has held together a camp with so many centrifugal forces. Now it must decide how much it can peel of its extremist base in order to open up to those uncommitted voters who may not share Jobbik’s ideology but appreciate its concern for the plight of the common person under Fidesz rule.

Theoretically, moving towards more moderate positions offers a lot more in terms of electoral support than whatever Jobbik stands to lose on the right. Practically, however,

these benefits may never materialise or they may prove transient. Jobbik might strike some disgruntled Fidesz or Socialist voters' fancy for a time, but then the latter may decide to go back to their earlier preferences for whatever reason. And it may well happen that the portion of Jobbik's current electorate that such a course would alienate is in fact the most loyal part of the base that would have kept Jobbik in Parliament even when its new allies prove flighty.

These are difficult strategic dilemmas for the radical right party, but it appears that it is no longer committed to holding together all fringes of the extremist camp. It is well conceivable that even Vona and his fellow party leaders have not yet decided how many layers they are prepared to shed for more respectability. But from Toroczkai all the way to the campaign masterminds of Fidesz and MSZP, most everyone is probably noticing the signs.