



The first streetwise player goes political

While the parliamentary opposition is gaining little in the polls and is still struggling to mobilise its supporters for demonstrations, too, left-leaning civil organisations are increasingly successful at harnessing the growing unpopularity of the Fidesz government. Well-attended as civil rallies may be, in the long-run Fidesz can only be defeated at the ballot box. One of the prominent organisations behind the street demonstrations, 4K!, has drawn the appropriate conclusion and is turning into a political party. Others may follow. The tacit non-aggression agreement between the left-wing opposition parties and the civil movement may suffer as a result. The crucial question for the growing number of players on the political left will be how to compete and co-operate at the same time – for without co-operation they are undermining any chances of ousting Fidesz.

In March 2011, the colourful amalgamation of civil organisations collected under the banner of *For the Freedom of the Press* and comprising the now fairly prominent „Milla” and „4K!” (as in Fourth Republic) groups, was the first opposition movement that managed to hold a substantial demonstration against the Orbán-government’s policies. For the standards of a dejected and generally street-averse left-wing, the March demonstration, featuring between 30,000-50,000 participants, was impressive. Yet especially in light of some of the harsher policies preceding it, such as the media law and the restrictions on the powers of the Constitutional Court, it was remote from anything that would strike fear in the hearts of Fidesz’ future campaign managers.

The demonstration last Sunday was a manifestation of an increasing willingness to protest the government’s policies, however, even if it still far from an overwhelming expression of popular dissatisfaction. Realistic estimates of participation range from 50,000-100,000, which is large indeed, especially considering that the organisers – apparently not looked upon favourably by the weather gods – lack politically recognisable popular faces and, as we noted, generally left-wingers prefer to curse at the government in the privacy of their kitchens/TV sets rather than on the street.

It is of course true that the absence of noteworthy politicians among the organisers made it possible for many to join the demonstration in the first place. At this stage, most prominent public figures on the left tend to polarise even among their own potential electorate, and Fidesz’ growing unpopularity has done little to unify its left-wing opposition.

Civic duties

A civil co-operation is therefore indeed the most suitable instrument for rallying individual citizens under an anti-government flag. For left-wing voters, the temporal distance of the next election may seem painfully long: but their obvious distaste for political alternatives suggests that they need the time at least as much as Fidesz does.

The attendance at the official LMP celebration – politely timed so as not to coincide with the civic rally – was a reminder of how difficult the situation of the parliamentary opposition is: a few dozen people came to the event. Several MSZP politicians decided to join the civil demonstration, as the Socialists did not hold a public gathering in Budapest on that day. Clearly, before 2010 Fidesz was much better at mobilising popular frustration.

Yet it is also clear that if these protests are to lead to anything concrete, then in the long run the civic frustration vented must somehow be channelled into a real political alternative. Street demonstrations are at best expressions of noble opinions, at worst mere venting. They are not suitable for sustaining political opposition in a parliamentary regime. Various speakers at the event not only acknowledged this much, but in fact emphasised it.

A new movement

In light of the high levels of popular dissatisfaction, new parties on the left (and the right) stand a better than usual chance of succeeding. That is why Fidesz' decision to exacerbate ballot access requirements, which were too stringent to begin with, is a clever but also wicked move. The first civil organisation to face this challenge from the bunch that is engaged in organising the series of protests against the government is 4K!

It appears extremely unlikely that 4K! really decided on becoming a party just after the demonstration. It is also improbable that the success and publicity of the former was not a key factor in timing this announcement. The likely scenario is that 4K! sought to milk this publicity to give its own new political manifestation maximum exposure. Even Milla, 4K!'s main partner in organising the event, was surprised – and none too happy – to find out about the new party from the press and has vowed not to organise with 4K! again.

Difficult transitions

The transition from civil organisation to political party is always tricky, and many of the organisations involved in last Sunday's demonstration – especially the union-run Szolidaritás, but allegedly even Milla – are grappling with the same problem. There is no way to do this quite elegantly, for many of those who perceive a civil organisation as a disinterested check on the political elite are likely to harbour doubts once their favoured organisation cedes the moral high ground and descends into the swamp of politics.

This becomes even more difficult when activists and sympathisers of other parties are present in a supporting capacity at a rally – where some speakers tore into the entire political class, including the opposition – one of whose organisers is actually planning to become a competitor of their own party in the very near future. Motivations become difficult to disentangle at such a juncture.

Still, for most of the civil movement it was clear relatively early on that they wish to be more than merely outsider's criticising the government, and 4K!, though with low score on elegance, is the first to actually dare the move.

Already powerful

It is a testament to the popularity and increasing clout of the organisations involved that the criticism of 4K!'s move was very subdued. Milla was clearly displeased, but Gergely Karácsony, LMP's deputy parliamentary leader, only uttered some very subdued criticism, apparently not (yet) wishing to enter into a conflict with a party that is mostly immediately LMP's own competitor.

Thus far, little is known about 4K!'s ideology, except that it wants to be patriotic and left-wing. It has taken a clear stance on the thorny alliance/coalition issue, vowing that it would join forces with anyone but Jobbik in order to replace Fidesz. Distinguishing themselves from LMP on this front, 4K! emphasises that this includes MSZP and Gyurcsány as well. In fact, the party has held out the prospect of acting as a kind of mediator between the latter two and LMP to make an overarching alliance easier.

Staying friendly among these potential partners looks easy enough now, with the elections over two and half years away. As the elections near the stakes will grow, however, and all these parties and the rivalry between the potential partners for some of the same segments of the electorate will also encumber future co-operation. It is unlikely that the prevailing cordiality can be maintained then. In fact, the question is how these parties can avoid souring each other to such a degree as would make an electoral alliance or subsequent coalition government impossible to operate.