



## Voter registration has come to stay

*Following the reforms of the respective laws on municipal and parliamentary elections, Fidesz has finally introduced the last piece of the electoral rules puzzle, the new bill on electoral procedure. As has been anticipated for a while now, this law will bring Hungary a voluntary voter registration scheme to replace the system of automatic registration in place until now. Apart from Fidesz' hopes that registration will keep anti-government late deciders at home, the measure has not much to recommend itself. Fidesz has deftly added a few other changes to the bill, which managed to steer quite a bit of the reporting on the bill away from the most controversial measures. Not for the first time, a legal act in Hungary would compel every municipality to have at least some fully accessible facilities for people with limited mobility. Also on the plus side, at least in the context of parliamentary elections the proposed bill would make it significantly easier to become a candidate.*

Voter registration has been one of the buzz issues of the past few months, with countless analyses and critiques published on the question, a hunger strike held by former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány and some of his supporters, and a brief period of agonising whether the left-wing opposition should participate in the debate over the relevant bill, which is meant to comprehensively reform the law on electoral procedure. By the time the bill was actually introduced last Tuesday, however, registration barely registered.

It appeared that the debate was exhausted or at least the media thought the public has had enough of it. Reactions were subdued, and hardly anyone noticed how the right-wing media managed to frame the bill as if the most relevant change proposed were improved accessibility requirements for voters with limited mobility. Given that the government is planning to adopt a measure that will bar people from voting for four years in any election – referenda, by-elections, etc. – if they fail to register within the timeframe allotted, pinpointing the otherwise relevant accessibility requirements takes chutzpah.

### **As expected**

It is true, no stunning revelations came to light concerning registration. Citizens who are also residents of Hungary have two weeks to register by mail in September 2013. Once that time has elapsed, they can register either by trudging to the local municipality or by using the government's e-portal. For the roughly 7 million voting age citizens who have not yet registered for use of the e-portal, however, it's back to square one: they still have to go to the local municipality to register. Which, incidentally, could prove quite a hassle for those with reduced mobility, since many Hungarian municipalities have failed to provide for fully accessible municipal services, even though it is now well past the legal deadline when they should have done so.

Hungarians outside the borders have it somewhat easier, assuming they like snail mail or have no problems accessing the internet. Though they can't register personally, they can use regular mail for the entire 7-8 months registration period, and may also use the online



possibility. While some critics have decried this as a scheme designed to favour ethnic Hungarians across the borders over ‘inlanders’, the fact is that those outside Hungary would face a huge obstacle if they wanted to register in person, even if consular facilities were made available for this purpose.

### ***Little thought at all***

Even if there were some problem of unfairness in the respective treatment accorded to Hungarians in and outside the country, it appears relatively minor as compared to the issue of why registration is necessary at all. The government for its part has hardly bothered to explain. Generally, the reasoning was that registration is good because Fidesz says it is good. At least that’s the most generous interpretation of the arguments the governing party has advanced, such as the notion that registration will facilitate and increase participation, because...well, because they say so. Though there may be some abstract notions that one might use to justify voluntary registration (e.g. voting is a privilege rather than a right) and some practical circumstances (frequent voter fraud might be one), but the latter do not apply and the government hasn’t bothered with the former. That is probably no coincidence, as most of the commonly voiced reasons sound quaint and elitist.

As with many other issues, Fidesz clearly feels no need to provide a cogent rationale for a decision that will be expensive to administer and significantly reduce democratic participation (which was not all that high to begin with). But the most vociferous critics of registration would never have voted for Fidesz anyway. As far as the rest is concerned, the roughly half of voters without a party preference, the idea is precisely to make sure that many of them stay at home. Under the current electoral regime, these plodding and politically disaffected masses might have roused themselves at the last minute to teach the government a lesson, as they have done in most elections since 1990.

### ***Keeping the idiots at bay***

Hence most the honest assessment of the intention behind the registration scheme came from an anonymous Fidesz source, who said the goal was to “keep the idiots from voting”, though not even the anonymous comment is fully sincere, since idiot is probably code for dissatisfied and hence likely non-Fidesz voters. All in all, Fidesz speculates that its own core demographic, the educated and politically active upper-middle class will be among the strata that are most likely to register. For MSZP, registration cuts both ways: pensioners are likely to be active, while the lower middle-classes are less likely to register. Jobbik and LMP will probably also suffer, since they are strongest among young voters who are traditionally less active politically and, moreover, also often face additional administrative burdens, such as living away from where they are officially residing and hence would be allowed to register. Both parties, but Jobbik especially, draw heavily on anti-establishment sentiment, which – outside a core of enthusiastic anti-establishment types – is more difficult to mobilise. However, Jobbik’s strong organisational background – and its proven success in mobilisation at the grassroots level – might help them to overcome these difficulties and mobilise their potential voters.



One could parse the various demographics and their anticipated tendencies at length, but ultimately the crucial point is that Fidesz' experts expect that registration will forestall massive anti-government sentiment at the polls, and they're likely right. That is the only rationale behind registration, and clearly one that is difficult to convey to the public.

## **Accessibility**

Odd as the government's communication may have been on the issue, one cannot be but impressed how prominent an issue accessibility became on the day of the announcement. And to be sure, the hype in the right-wing media was not entirely unjustified. Ballots in Braille, accessible voting stations, etc., are long overdue.

Yet it appears that the new commitments are mostly cheap (e.g. Braille ballot), while the most expensive commitment – physically accessible voting stations in each municipality – is merely another iteration of a promise that was made already in the 2007 amendment of the law on the rights of persons with disabilities. With a 2010 deadline that has already expired, the law provides that all municipalities ought to have at the very least one fully accessible municipal building. If that were the case, it would make it very easy to meet the new legal requirement of designating a fully accessible voting station in each municipality. Alas, many municipalities have been unable to meet the previously designated deadline, and given their dearth of funds it is unlikely that they will be able to meet the next one.

## **Ballot access eased**

For all the bad news, there is something also very right about the pending bill, even if its inspiration is probably not comprehensively fair-minded. We have complained before about ballot access requirements, the onerous burdens parties and individual politicians must bear if they want to appear on the ballot. According to the rules adopted by Fidesz last year (which already constituted an easing over the previous requirements), it would take almost as many signatures to field a national list in Hungary as in Germany, a country eight times the size.

Pursuant to the new rules an individual candidate for parliament will only have to collect 200 signatures to qualify for the ballot rather than a 1,000. A party that wishes to have a national list and is thus required to qualify 27 candidates can appear on the ballot nationally by collecting only 5,400 signatures rather than the previously required 27,000. That is still high in international comparison, but it is no longer extreme and, more importantly, it does not appear unreasonable. Sure, candidates will find a few new requirements irritating: before collecting signatures they must designate the persons who will perform the collection and they may only use government issued sheets. But overall, it would be impossible not to acknowledge that this will make the Hungarian political system much more open, even if only for candidates rather than voters, who will find their way towards the ballot box much encumbered. However, it must be also added that easing ballot access may also favour Fidesz in 2014: a fragmented left with many candidates to vote for clearly improves the chances of the governing party at the next general elections.