



Hungarian politics in 2012: Fidesz and its opposition

2012 has not brought a massive shift in the political fortunes of the key Hungarian political players, but even the slight changes reveal a dynamic that will cause the governing party, Fidesz, some headaches. Still, despite significant troubles Fidesz remains in a far stronger position for 2014 than MSZP was during the same period of its most recent term. MSZP is inching upwards in the polls, but despite a series of disastrous economic news and plenty of controversial decisions by the governing party, the left remains unable to overtake Fidesz. As long as the gradual shift towards the left continues in the same pace, however, there are still realistic prospects for a united left in 2014. For Jobbik, there has been little movement, too little to buttress great hopes for 2014. But the party nevertheless boasts support, organisation and funds that could sustain it even if its parliamentary representation will be diminished on account of the unfavourable electoral rules.

Though it has not actually brought the end of the world, 2012 has not been nice to Fidesz. The governing party has sunk to ever new lows in the polls as its early hopes that 2012 would be the year of economic reversal were dashed. A hostile international environment, the lack of reforms, the persistently oppressive debt and the impact of the associated austerity measures have combined to plunge Hungary back into recession after years of low growth. Moreover, there is no sign that 2013 will be much better, leaving the government with little hope that the early months of 2014 can provide sufficient good news to counter the sacrifices of the preceding years.

Still, what appears most extraordinary about these developments is not Fidesz' massive drop from favour since its overwhelming victory in 2010, but the impressive resilience of its core support and how the ruling party successfully exploits the divisions in the opposition to maintain a commanding lead among likely voters. If Fidesz has hit rock bottom – which remains beyond our power to predict – it remains favoured to retain power in 2014. Of course, there is a huge elephant in the room where such calculations are made: roughly half of all voters have no preferences, and there are not many among them whose apparent lack of interest stems from an overall sense of satisfaction with the way things are going.

Enter the low participation democracy

In a low turnout election, such as 1998 or 2010 – the two years when Fidesz won since 2010 – the hardcore Fidesz base would be likely to put the governing party over the top. If the election will rile voters like it did in 2002, for instance, when Fidesz' polarising politics brought over 70% to the polls, then that would mean that many of the currently uninterested voters will have cast a ballot, which would augur ill for Viktor Orbán's "15-20 years" power perspective.

As we have pointed out often before, for Orbán to stay in office many voters need to stay at home. Previously, Fidesz' slogan used to be "everyone bring another person along" – to the polls, that is. The new slogan will be for everyone to leave another person at home and a whole array of instruments, starting with voter registration, the shortened campaign period,



parties' reduced access to media for campaign purposes, etc., will be there to help Fidesz realise its ambition of a low participation democracy. Combined with a glimmer of good news next year and in 2014, an opposition that fails to coalesce behind joint candidates, the institutional barriers would make Viktor Orbán a shoo-in for PM again.

The left is not back yet

In contrast to Fidesz, the left-wing opposition is finally faring better, but it must fervently pray that it has not peaked. Impressively, in its most recent survey Szonda-Ipsos – certainly not a pollster with a pro-Fidesz bias – has MSZP and LMP at a combined 38% (32% and 6%, respectively) among likely voters, trailing Fidesz by 2. While there were months when some pollsters saw the combined numbers of the two left-wing opposition parties ahead of Fidesz, their lead was never near enough for an outright victory.

This despite the fact that the left had its best year since, well, 2006. Though the good year primarily manifests itself in the form of bad news for the government, the left has shown some signs of resurgence, too. For one, MSZP's polling numbers inch slowly but continuously upwards. Outside the non-establishment left, LMP is still failing to make headway, but there are increasing signs of activism that contrast strongly with the image of dejected passivity that the left exuded after Fidesz' crushing victory in 2010. Rallies organised by Milla are well-attended, especially by historical standards of the left, and the plethora of new movements and parties illustrates not only new ideological needs, but also a sense that there is political capital to be won and support to be gathered by engaging in left-wing politics.

The candidates

Former Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai's return into politics is also an indicator that the prospects of the left seem much improved. For almost two and a half years Bajnai ignored the increasingly fever-pitched pleas for his return. His sudden public appearance in October, coupled with intense organisational activity by his Haza és Haladás Foundation, signalled that he is aware that leading the left may be an attractive (read: winning) proposition from here on out. That, too, is something not seen in years. MSZP and its leader, Attila Mesterházy, appear reluctant to cede the PM candidacy at a time when they have grounds to believe they may be able to capture the position themselves.

As long as the opposition parties manage to agree on joint candidates in the parliamentary districts, the competition between them until the election is not necessary harmful for their joint prospects. In fact, the most promising development for the left over the past year has been the improved capability of the parties on the left to talk with one another. Though LMP is torn by the issue of alliances, much of the histrionics about its decision rejecting the advances of the Bajnai-Milla-Solidarity partnership fails to take into account that there is plenty of time to reverse an internal vote that was this close. That is not to say that the rivalry between the left-wing organisations could not lead to suicidal games of chicken, but merely to observe that as one would anticipate, for now the trend is towards greater co-

operation. As the election approaches and Fidesz' ousting will appear an increasingly tangible hope, the pressure to co-operate will increase dramatically.

Getting crowded on the far-right

Unlike the left, Jobbik has thus far failed to capitalise on Fidesz' troubles. In fact, arguably Fidesz' more difficult position is squeezing Jobbik, as through its rhetoric (e.g. the talk about foreign domination and efforts at colonising Hungary) and symbolic actions (the Horthy and Nyiró rehabilitations), the ruling right-wing party is fishing for support on the far right. While there are segments of the Jobbik electorate that would be easier for the left to capture than for Fidesz, Jobbik may well have to vie with Fidesz for some of the most committed radical voters.

That said, Jobbik's position is still strong. The new electoral system is likely to significantly slash its parliamentary representation, but as the French example shows a far-right party can survive and do well even under such circumstances, though the Hungarian context may make Jobbik's fate more difficult. For the time being, the party retains significant support in the polls, it has a robust organisation and impressive amounts of money, most recently manifested by the mass distribution of its new tabloid-style weekly print magazine, which supplements an already impressive media empire. For demographic reasons, the key to Jobbik's short term survival is obviously in Eastern and North-Eastern Hungary, though in the long-run it will have to develop strategies that appeal to all of the country. Since the North-East is also crucial for the left's hopes of regaining power, the region will most likely feature intense battles in 2014, and much unofficial campaigning until then.