

Jobbik bides its time

There has been no major shift in Jobbik's politics since the elections

Making it into the news has become much more difficult for Jobbik now that the novelty of its ascendance has worn off. Once they overcame their hesitation to invite extremists to TV shows, the TV-channels couldn't get enough before the elections. Scandalous statements sell, even if the definition of scandalous keeps shifting ominously. But since the elections Jobbik has emerged as a parliamentary party and its opinions are less novel, less exciting.

Now Jobbik apparently feels it won't get its due share without going so far as to suggest establishing a concentration camp for Roma criminals. Not for criminals in general, but for Roma specifically – the proponents felt no need to masquerade the ethnic nature of the proposed project. To be sure, pursuant to its suggestion, Jobbik's camp would have little in common with the historically notorious concentration camps, it would be your sort of friendly neighbourhood KZ, but still: even in a country that has become obtuse to a lot of extremism, this still triggered media attention.

When a party makes its first successful entry into national politics with such a splash as Jobbik did in 2009, with 14.8% of the votes in the first national election it fought on its own (the EP elections), and then with 16.7% this April, then the hard questions about its future course will also surface quicker than if it had achieved this strength more gradually.

Crudely, there are two options available. One is the road towards the outer edges of the centre-right, that is gradually espousing moderation and vying with Fidesz for right-of-centre voters as well, rather than merely the extremist fringe. The reward is potential governmental responsibility, much like Gianfranco Fini's post-fascist National Alliance achieved in Italy over the past two decades (others, such as Germany's Republikaner failed spectacularly).

In their wildest dreams, Jobbik "moderates" may even imagine themselves emerging as the alternative to a flailing Fidesz-government whose left-wing opposition (MSZP) is either discredited in the eyes of many voters, or not yet ready to seriously engage a governing party (LMP) – to be even remotely conceivable, this would imply a very decisive opening towards the centre, however, and for the time being Jobbik lacks the cadres (and the inclination) to do this convincingly.

The risk of this approach is a party-split, with extremists taking the committed hardcore activist wing and a substantial portion of the voters. In fact, the international evidence regarding extremist parties suggests that incidents of party splits are very common in general, and most likely inevitable when the party starts straying from extremism. At the

same time, Fidesz might successfully retain its own voters, leaving the aspiring moderates stranded between a centrist Fidesz and their own secessionists – and without voters.

The other route is to continue to pander to both extremists and ideologically uncommitted voters who are distressed by the Roma community and petty crime, the corruption in national politics or both. Apart from its obvious success in the last two elections, the promise of this strategy is that it is likely to keep the extremist fringe – now apparently numerically significant, especially among young voters – content, and gives other voters little reason to defect, unless Fidesz deals decisively with the key policy issues.

If Fidesz is unsuccessful and haemorrhages voters to all opposition parties, it might yet weaken to a degree that would make it dependent on a coalition partner in 2014, and this may well be Jobbik. Haider's Freedom Party in Austria made it into government with this strategy in 1999 – though government participation did lead to a temporary moderation and its long-term effects split the party, too.

The potential downside here is that ultimately a successful Fidesz government will draw at least some – notably the pragmatist – of the current Jobbik voters away, and with persuasive national rhetoric it might even peel off some less extremist far-righters. Jobbik is unlikely to fall below the parliamentary threshold in the near future, but with 16.7% it does have a lot to lose, most importantly its medium-size status.

Given that unlike Fidesz, Jobbik is not a party in which the leader exercises near total control, the course ultimately chosen might not be the result of a deliberate strategy, but rather a natural evolution, the result of successive intra-party contests.

Making any prognosis about the future choices of a party led by a bunch of young and little-known activists would be little more than guesswork. What we can do – apart from sketching the options, as we did above – is to take a look the party's actual activities in light of these options.

Thus far, Jobbik's activities suggest that they have no intention of letting go of the extremist aspects of their agenda and rhetoric, though they do add a lot of elements into the mix that suggest a constructive/moderate opposition approach to complement their radical stances.

When they have found something to embrace, such as dual citizenship and the Trianon remembrance day, they have been enthusiastic about it, and they made sure that everyone knows that they like what the government does (though often noting that all the government really did on a particular point was to embrace their ideas, which is well within the meaning of constructive opposition.)

On certain important issues, most importantly the election of President Pál Schmitt, they expressed a cautious deference to the government's choice of policy or persons. Crucially, Jobbik's representatives attended the inauguration ceremony for Schmitt, while the

representatives of MSZP and LMP declined to do so on the grounds that their invitations were delivered a day before the event.

Similarly, Jobbik was also guardedly supportive of the government's economic programme, though a less generous interpretation of this particular stance is that they seem to lack the expertise to formulate exacting criticisms of economic policies. Economic policies have been almost irrelevant in Jobbik's rise, and the party has thus far not seen the need to beef up its competence in this area.

Finally, they have been critical and called for alternatives on two fronts. One – surprising – area is the protection of some democratic values. While Jobbik's understanding of democracy is hazy and its commitment to Western-style parliamentary democracy is dubious at best, it has attacked the Fidesz-government's moves in a number of important areas, such as the initial draft of the harsh media law, the appointment of party loyalists to independent oversight positions and the stricter requirements for fielding candidates in local elections.

Gábor Vona also gave an impassioned speech in parliament lamenting the political persecution of Jobbik supporters, which, though it has thus far eluded the radar of human rights groups, may have been the genuine experience of some activists whose dealings ran afoul of local bigwigs. In any case, Jobbik's unexpected stance in support of some key democratic values stems from a mix of the following: the youth culture that it is embedded in, which, though ambivalent about the theoretical concept of freedom, espouses it in practice; from its status as a political minority which makes it sensitive towards the needs of an opposition party that operates against an oversized governmental party; as an expression of moderation that signals to voters that all the talk about Jobbik's dictatorial aspirations is mistaken (if one is willing to overlook the massive evidence to the contrary).

The second strain of criticism against the government concern what everyone expected, that is Jobbik's perception that no decisive steps have been taken against the Roma, against the MSZP and the officials of the previous government, and that national restoration in general is too slow and timid. The concentration camp proposal fits in this line of approach, the unequivocal expressions of Jobbik's commitment to the extremists in its own ranks.

As expected, the cracks in the hastily recruited, unknown and untested mid-level leadership are showing. László Toroczkai – though not formally a member of Jobbik, he is one of the most recognised figures in the nationalist movement – has attacked the “careerists” in Jobbik following a statement by a lesser-known figure, Lajos Pószé, that the Hungarian Guard was outdated and no longer served a purpose. Jobbik's leader split the difference, sanctioning Pószé for talking out of line and telling Toroczkai to mind his own business.

Such conflicts are inevitable, but as long as Jobbik's most skilled operators, notably Gábor Vona, can successfully maintain a simultaneous foothold in the extremist community and the world of TV studios and average citizens, the party itself need not crack over it. On the

whole, therefore, there are no indications that Jobbik would plan to move decisively to challenge Fidesz for moderate right-wing voters. If it is to gain any strength, it will have to draw people who are disappointed with Fidesz and not viscerally opposed to Jobbik – a maybe not insignificant, but inherently limited segment of the population.

But Jobbik keeps evolving and in the foreseeable future its development will remain one of the most crucial political issues and the subject of future columns.