

Colour Us Orange

With the entire country solidly lined up in the Fidesz column, it's time to lift the veil and reveal what the government will be up to

What is obvious even with all the spin that the various party leaders and spokespersons tried to come up with was that Fidesz scored an overwhelming victory on Sunday. The bar had been set very high both by the 2006 municipal elections and the parliamentary elections this April, but Fidesz produced its best tally yet.

For a municipal election with so many races, there were remarkably few surprises Sunday night – though one, Jobbik's lacklustre performance, might prove crucial. Most of those who were handicapped to win did so, and most of the nail-biters ultimately also turned out as anticipated.

The coming weeks will hopefully offer the opportunity to undertake a more detailed analysis of the Hungarian political structure after the end of Fidesz' successful election trifecta (EP 2009, national parliament and municipal elections 2010), but for now – before briefly reviewing the four parliamentary parties one-by-one – two key conclusions for the government.

At this point, Hungary is definitely “orange country”, as newspapers like to point out. Even if one subtracts the rhetorical frills, Orbán is right in asserting that the country has lined up behind Fidesz, thereby fulfilling for the time being his prior aspiration of subsuming much of the national interest in one party. If so much of the national interest – most of the nations' local governments, virtually all of its locally elected MPs, etc. – is manifested in one party, that is bound to engender internal conflicts because Orbán is plainly wrong if he believes that these extremely diverse regional and other interests are generally united (he is not wrong, of course, he doesn't really believe that). If conflicts erupt openly, that would be an entirely novel experience for this most disciplined formation.

The other conclusion is that the coming months now have to reveal if and what the government has planned for the coming years. Along with the budget, all the other reform plans of the government will have to be laid open sooner or later. This will draw expert and opposition scrutiny and inevitably conflicts, criticisms and some setbacks as well. But with all the balloting done now, a further delay in tackling the issues facing the country – and the adverse consequences of such a delay – might strain even the patience of those experts and opinion-makers favourably inclined to Fidesz.

And now for the competitors.



Fidesz

Even if the overwhelming joy that some might have expected was absent, this was certainly not on account of the election results: Fidesz not only won all the counties and did so with better results than at its amazing peak in April, but it also captured Budapest for the first time and swept all major towns (the so-called 'county-level' towns, whose inhabitants do not vote for a county assembly because their own municipal assembly qualifies as such) save Szeged, where it also holds a plurality in the city assembly, leaving MSZP mayor Botka in a difficult position.

Really, the worst news for Fidesz may be that it has peaked to such a degree that the only way from here is probably down. Apart from Botka and three re-elected MSZP district mayors in Budapest, the few noteworthy Fidesz defeats came in smaller towns. Had the results in the larger towns and more important municipalities not been this lopsided, the press commentators would most likely have paid little attention to the few mid-sized municipalities not governed by Fidesz, but in what would have otherwise been a fairly monotonous evening, the TV pundits harped gladly on any town whose name might be recognised by the viewers where Fidesz mayoral candidates lost.

Many of these victors were independents, such as the mayor of Gödöllő, György Gémesi, who had once been considered a staunch Fidesz ally. In fact, he declined to run for the town's parliamentary seat in April so as not to disrupt the Fidesz victory there, in return for which he was promised a 'no contest' this October. To Gémesi's (and apparently Gödöllőians', too) outrage, Fidesz did not abide by its promise, but the popular mayor trounced the Fidesz candidate 72.6%-19.7%.

Another oddity was the race in Esztergom, where mayor Tamás Meggyes, whose nationally reported scandals had become a source of embarrassment for Fidesz (his hold on the Fidesz-candidacy remains somewhat of a mystery), was faced by an extraordinary and unique MSZP-LMP-Jobbik alliance. The independent candidate supported by the opposition parties prevailed with an almost two-thirds majority – given that Fidesz won 9 of the town's ten districts, it is reasonable to assume that a less controversial candidate would have performed vastly better. Though mostly in less acrimonious circumstances than the above, there were a couple of medium-sized towns where independent mayors beat Fidesz-challengers.

MSZP

Party leaders bravely tried to point to some 'high-profile' victories amidst the painful losses of most of the party's remaining municipalities, but the names of the towns they came up with – e.g. Szentés, Makó, Sajószentpéter – showed clearly that with a few exceptions MSZP only has some smaller towns to lean on counter Fidesz' control of virtually all the big prizes. MSZP held on to a mere 49 of its 147 mayoralties – already the remnants of the 2006



decimation of its municipal ranks – though some left-wing mayors, notably the MSZP's former leftist fire-brand József Karsai, won as independents.

Yet, even as some pundits were mocking Attila Mesterházy's post-election speech cum presentation, the MSZP-chairman quite correctly made out an important silver lining in the Socialists' performance: While in April MSZP had finished behind Jobbik in 9 of the country's 19 counties, including all seven eastern counties, it was now behind in only three northeastern counties, and even in these its margin of defeat shrank considerably (e.g. from ca. 10% in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg to 0.08 and 3.3%, respectively). In most counties, the number of votes cast for the MSZP party lists were an improvement over the April results.

In other words the Socialists reasserted their position as the second strongest party nationally. But at this point, not too much can be made of this: as we noted last time (see week 40 newsletter), for MSZP to re-merge as a challenger to Fidesz it must regain its strength in its former strongholds, notably in some parts of eastern Hungary and Budapest, and its slightly improved results are a far cry from consolidation. Sándor Káli's defeat in Miskolc, as well as his meagre 38% of the vote, demonstrate that there is a long way to go still for the Socialists.

For MSZP, the stars of the night were undeniably Budapest 13th district mayor József Tóth and Szeged's László Botka. Both pulled off stunning victories. Tóth's was surprising not because he won, but because he actually improved his 2006 result by 6%. Unlike some of his re-elected MSZP colleagues, he also holds a solid majority in the district assembly. As opposed to Tóth, Botka faced a very determined Fidesz campaign to oust him, but ultimately not even the last minute withdrawal of the Jobbik candidate and his endorsement of the Fidesz contender was enough to make the race very tight. Nevertheless, Botka faces a clear opposition majority in the city assembly, without any potential allies. This may prove a bittersweet victory yet. To refer back to our analysis from last week, the voters of Kazincbarcika and two of the Budapest working class districts, 19th and 20th, also retained their MSZP mayors.

Jobbik

Even at the best of times, Chairman Gábor Vona is not the exuberant type, but yesterday he seemed positively sad, though also combative. For Jobbik, after two extremely successful elections, Sunday's ballot was meant to be another major breakthrough, but it was not to be. Not only did it fail to solidify its position as the second party in eastern Hungary, but it lost percentages and missed the opportunity to win significant mayoralities. During the day, the unexpectedly high participation in its stronghold northeastern counties fuelled speculation in Jobbik circles that its voters were turning out in high numbers, but apparently Jobbik was a

victim rather than a beneficiary of the northeasterners' higher predilection to vote on Sunday.

In conservative western Hungary, where the extreme right party was never as strong to begin with, Jobbik mostly stagnated, though it did not experience a reversal of fortunes similar to the result in its eastern bastions. Budapest was the other major disappointment: once the stronghold of the extreme right movement, Jobbik now dropped almost 2% below its April results, with its mayoral candidate Gábor Staudt performing especially weakly.

But Jobbik remains a force to be reckoned with, its setback was a relative one. It still controls upwards of a fifth of the vote in much of the country's eastern half and while its dream of becoming the main opposition party at least regionally may have suffered a blow, even at the current level of support the party might become infeasible as a kingmaker in 2014.

LMP

As we pointed out last week, LMP started out without any favourable prospects because it failed to field candidates in most of the country. Though it ran strong in Budapest, it was impossible to overlook that even in the city where it is most entrenched it dropped from 12.81% in April to 11.13%. Its county level results in the few counties where it ran were also stagnant at best and even disappointing in Baranya, where it was strong in April and which was hailed as the party's emerging rural bastion. The only mayoralty LMP carried was the safe one it already held in Ivád, with some 360 inhabitants and whose mayor already has had some internal conflicts with the party leadership. For the party the task ahead is now clear: it must create a national network of activists and make its ideological approach clearer to voters outside Budapest's city centre. The latter *may* also require staking out some uncomfortable stances along the traditional left-right divide, because for now voters do not appear ready to follow the LMP's version of post-modern politics.