



No alternatives to Fidesz in sight

Fidesz' dominant position is largely unchallenged, the opposition has failed to exploit the government's weaknesses to improve its standing in the polls. There are some shadows for Fidesz, but at this point there are no strong indications that it might face strong competitors in the short run.

If you believe the opinion polls, Fidesz can't do anything wrong. Its popularity relative to other parties is astoundingly stable, especially in light of its more controversial acts. Explanations abound, most of them placing the blame squarely on the weakness of the opposition. We tend to agree, but wish to provide a slightly more balanced picture: thus far Fidesz has been careful to avoid antagonising voters where they tend to be most sensitive, i.e. their wallets.

For a party whose political death has been pronounced by critics numerous times – often before, but also since its humongous victory in April – Fidesz continues to display amazing strength in terms of popular approval. Its arrogant politics, Fidesz critics claim, will cause Fidesz to lose ground and – sooner or later, depending on the analyst, but definitely in the foreseeable future – cede political control to another player. The critics are not necessarily wrong, but there is no sign of this development yet.

Fidesz still riding high

According to the most recent survey by polling company Szonda-Ipsos, even though Fidesz has slipped somewhat since its peak of over 40%, it still retains support of 35% of the total population. Furthermore, its lead among those who would definitely vote if elections were held today remains stable, with 67% of certain voters claiming that they would vote for Fidesz and only 17% of this group promising to support MSZP. Jobbik and LMP stand at 11 and 5 percent, respectively.

Most importantly, the persistence of this massive margin between Fidesz and MSZP in spite of the dip in total support for Fidesz stems from the lacking enthusiasm of Socialist voters, only half of whom would actually turn out, while three-quarters of Fidesz supporters would vote. Even considering that opinion polls routinely overestimate Fidesz' level of support by a few percent, it appears probable that the governing party is at least as popular as it was on election day 2010, if not more so.

Time and again when the government enacted a more controversial act, critics crowed that this would be the straw that would unleash voter disaffection against Fidesz. Time and again it failed to occur.

Let's take a look at some of the explanations, because there are many, commensurately with the fact that the phenomenon itself is very complex.

A weak opposition?

There is near universal agreement among analysts that the main cause behind Fidesz' persistent popularity is an inept opposition. And we agree: for sure, it helps. The opposition hasn't produced the strong leaders, the coherent narrative or a creative line of attack that voters might latch onto.

The trio of opposition parties continues to fight its own inherent weaknesses. MSZP remains plagued by the memory of its two terms in government, which made many voters swear they'd never would help it back into power again. Such commitments can theoretically fade quickly, but MSZP has not done much to refashion itself and enter unto a path of redemption. It was very pleased to solidify its distant second party position during the municipal election last October, but remains anathema to many voters.

As we noted previously (2010, Week 37), Jobbik has not moved decisively to get rid of its image as an extremist firebrand party, which means that for now it won't be able to appeal to many moderate voters. LMP has potential, but as we wrote last year (2010, Week 40), it needs to expand its organisation and fundraising.

We don't think we heard you

The widespread perception is that most of the opposition's weakness stems from its bad communication: with so many slam dunk possibilities as this government provided, says a common criticism, the opposition should be thriving by now. Given that good communication is generally measured by success in the polls, it appears evident that parties low in the voters' esteem can't be communicating well.

But it is not always that simple. A party might be communicating well, but still be stuck in the polls for various reasons. First, the government might be more popular, which we will explore in the next section. Next, it might lack media access: this is definitely the case for the smaller opposition parties. While Jobbik fields a massive network of extremist online publications, their readership is by necessity limited, even if stunningly large in international comparison. LMP has no publications aligned with it and few sympathetic outlets in general. Both these parties lack strong access to mainstream media.

MSZP of course might have retained its ties with the left-wing mainstream media, but these ties are weakened and in any case, the left-wing media carries far less weight than it used to.

With the right-wing press occupying a growing segment of the media market and the public media now under direct government control, there is little space for the opposition to address voters through its radio and television channels. In effect, therefore, the opposition's communication is far from excellent, but it also suffers from the difficulty of finding outlets that carry this communication to voters.

Also, for good communication to have a chance with voters, the latter normally ought to have some cause to be dissatisfied with the incumbents. As of yet, that is what is most ominously lacking.

A strong hand, a hard touch

Which is not to say that voters should be pleased with what the government has done. Many of them nevertheless seem to be. And that part is not altogether surprising. As surveys conducted over the past couple of years have pointed out, large segments of the electorate did not at all mind the idea of a strong government – in a November 2008 survey, wrote the sociologist Tamás Pál in *Népszabadság*, „52 percent of respondents said they believe that 'in today's situation a single party would be needed that represents society in its entirety.' Only 28 percent resolutely reject the single party idea. 75 percent of respondents believe that 'we need a resolute leader who rules this country with an iron fist.' Only 10.4 percent reject this unequivocally."

Many analysts (us included) harboured their doubts whether voters would appreciate toughness once they really experienced it, and we still believe that many of the 52 percent who thought approvingly of the single party state would actually reject any irreversible moves in that direction. That said, voters probably were fed up with the indecisiveness and constant policy reversals under the previous government, and the current government's strong-headed course strikes a chord now, even with many voters who have no clear opinion as to whether abolishing the Fiscal Council is strictly speaking necessary for national redemption. The chattering classes regularly overestimate popular concern for and with democracy, while they often underestimate how result-oriented Hungarian voters are.

And as far as the latter is concerned, the main cause behind Fidesz' persistent popularity is at least in part the fact that thus far the average citizen has no reason to doubt that the government will hurt him/her where it matters: their disposable income. Sure, most of the government's generosity benefits high income voters and the rising prices will gradually hurt the rest. But thus far the painful measures have affected players that the voters are mostly glad to see punished (banks, large corporations). The one exception, the nationalisation of private pension accounts, did not affect that many voters, to some of those are now dead-set against Fidesz. As for the rest, they may not have benefited, but after years of austerity

policies they even be grateful for not being asked to sacrifice. Fidesz still has credit with most of those who moved decisively against the previous government parties.

And the vanishing voter

But still, there are small warning signs for the government. The proportion of those who can't name a party that they would support is growing steadily – now outnumbering the total number of those who would pick a party – and the new members of its ranks tend to be recent Fidesz voters. Experience shows that voters dissatisfied with their previous selection often move to the undecideds first, and only choose a new party after having spent a little while as onlookers. These undecideds harbour massive potential for either the current opposition or new opposition parties.