



## March 15<sup>th</sup>: An oversupply of national liberators

*The national celebration to commemorate the revolution of 1848 was an excellent display of how disunited Hungarians are. Political events took place all across Budapest and most of them had little to do with 1848 and all the more with current affairs. Of the campaign events, the most successful were Fidesz' peace march and Milla's civil demonstration. PM Viktor Orbán and Jobbik leader Gábor Vona gave the most memorable speeches, however. In trying to demonise the EU, both of them appear to be vying for similar constituencies. While PM Orbán is trying to make up with the EU and the IMF, he is simultaneously making sure that Hungarians know that these institutions and their hostility towards Hungary are to blame for many of the country's problems. Ultimately, this approach might yield precisely what Orbán seeks – money from abroad and recognition for his tough stance at home.*

Though some media critical of the government were at pains to point out how much smaller the crowd was at the March 15<sup>th</sup> Peace March in support of the government than at the previous, January version of the same event, the fact is that it was still plenty big enough, officially estimated at about 250,000. In light of the excellent weather and Fidesz' full embrace of the event, the somewhat smaller turnout may have been disappointing to some, but there are good explanations. The general mood is more mellow now than it was a few weeks ago, when state default appeared a proximate risk and there appeared no end to the stream of bad news. In light of the less dire atmosphere even many right-wing citizens might have felt that a long weekend with good weather is a great time to get away. Those that stayed arguably got more to see, however, with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and MEP József Szájer – famous for claiming to write the new constitution on his Ipad – addressing the crowd.

Not far away, in what is by now its standard location Milla held its third successful mass event, with tens of thousands, by some estimates 80,000 participants. Close by were Jobbik, LMP and Ferenc Gyurcsány's DK, with several thousand, 80, and several thousand participants respectively.

### ***The usual fare***

PM Viktor Orbán gave an extraordinarily combative speech, even by his standards. He noted that Hungary was a colony that nebulous foreign powers seek to dominate. These powers need to be fought off and the struggle for independence must continue as it did in 1848. Just as in 1848, the programme today is still to ensure that Hungary does not become a colony. The colony idea, or rather the rejection thereof, was the recurrent theme of the speech.

Orbán said that „we ourselves decide what is important and what is not. We do it from a Hungarian angle, with a Hungarian mindset, following the rhythm of the Hungarian heart. ...[W]e do not want the unsolicited help of strangers who wish to control us”. Later he



added that “modern age colonisers patiently stalk their targets, sedate it, and gradually exhaust the targeted nation’s vital instincts and resistance.” He carried on in much the same vein, with warnings against the encroachments of some murky enemy that includes speculators and finance, and also shot off several asides aimed at Brussels, its anti-Hungarian attitude, etc. The crowd applauded and chanted “Viktor, Viktor!”

## ***Separated at birth?***

Anyone can be forgiven for confusing Orbán’s speech with far-right Jobbik leader Vona’s, given that many of the themes they touched upon – especially colonisation – were the same. In large parts Orbán’s speech could have been one delivered by Vona. Vona himself was more radical than usually, potentially in reaction to the recent rightward shift in Orbán’s rhetoric. It appears that both leaders are vying for the same demographic, and as the challenger Vona cannot say basically the same stuff Orbán does, quibbling only with minor details. Thus if Fidesz’ communication is increasingly committed to an anti-EU and anti-foreign institutions and business rhetoric, then that is no longer sufficient for Jobbik. Consequently, Vona threatens some sort of militant activism if foreigners will be permitted to buy even a sliver of land in Hungary, though as always the fiercest pronouncements are hazy enough to allow for any real outcome or none at all.

We have previously (Weeks 2011/16, 2011/40) offered in these pages an analysis of Vona’s fundamental strategic dilemma: hold fast to its radical rhetoric and secure the extreme right but give up on more moderate voters, or try to expand Jobbik’s voter base by appealing to citizens who might sympathise with Jobbik but disdain its extremism. Though far from a definite response, Vona’s recent speech is an important data point in a long-term analysis of the issue.

## ***A complex approach***

What to make of the prime minister’s speech in that context, however? In terms of identifying any steady course in his communication, he is even harder to pinpoint than Vona. This is apparent even in our own analyses over the past few months. We have praised the government’s reasonability when it decided to seek the IMF’s help, and wrote about his conciliatory approach towards *some* of the international players he has offended since taking office. Then – sometimes stunned – we noted how the government once again backtracked and re-embraced its confrontational style.

It appears that we are back to square one, though the most recent aggressiveness, too, is likely to be only an outburst or a brief phase. There is no constancy at all to Orbán’s rhetoric, and at least to a certain degree that may be intentional. Orbán clearly wishes that the two worlds, one in which he seeks to curry favour with the EU, IMF, etc., and one in

which he deplures them, can coexist peacefully. In this world of his own creation his voters admire him for standing up to international pressure while he simultaneously secures loans from the IMF and keeps the EU happy with his policies, using the latter's subsidies to bolster laggard Hungarian growth. Though his crass comments last Thursday might make the contrast especially striking, this is not a new approach.

## ***The end of double talk?***

For years, Orbán's strategy was to employ a completely different phraseology and conceptual framework in his domestic speeches than in his international appearances. Because of his famous dictum of "heed what I do and not what I say," and because Hungary is plainly not a major factor in the international arena, this has worked rather well. The EU was probably not apprised in comprehensive detail about Orbán's and Fidesz' rhetoric because Brussels has more important concerns. Still, it was well aware of the gist but unconcerned as long as the rhetoric had no or little bearing on reality at the policy level.

Several things have changed, however. For one, in crucial respects there is now a connection between rhetoric and reality, starting with the harsh levies and other costly measures imposed on MNCs. Second, because of its controversial policies – especially in the context of democracy and the rule of law – in virtually all policy areas and the recurring threat of a state default, the international media and public is more conscious of the goings-on in Hungary than previously. The level of scrutiny is therefore higher.

A year ago to date the parallel Orbán drew between Moscow and Brussels was a lot more explicit than his comment last Thursday, and yet there was hardly any reaction, in spite – or maybe because – of the fact that Hungary held the rotating presidency of the EU. This time there was intense international coverage, and through a spokesperson European Commission President José Manuel Barroso said that such comments evince "a complete lack of understanding of what democracy is and show a lack of respect for those who have fought for freedom and democracy."

## ***Far from over***

Barroso's harsh and highly unusual reaction may indicate that the European Commission has lost patience with Orbán. That need not concern the prime minister, however. He does not need to poll well in Brussels, he just needs to keep the money flowing. The current perception is that he can do that by making a few substantive concessions that will nevertheless leave the political superstructure that he has established intact.

The government will probably have to impose some more austerity measures, which might have some impact on Fidesz' already battered popularity. But in the process it will retain the

political benefits of its course, both in terms of the institutional changes it has enacted and in terms of polishing Orbán's image as a tough fighter for national interests.

With the international pressure rising, Orbán appears most concerned with Jobbik emerging as the most determined representative of national interests. In an ideal scenario for Fidesz, Orbán manages to sell himself to the international actors as a moderate if somewhat awkward bulwark against the far-right, while his own voters will accept him as the *realpolitik* version of Vona, who has for now publicly eschewed the possibility that he might become a more mellow version of himself. The only players who haven't placed any bids in this game are the IMF and the EU. But based on previous experience, Orbán need not fear much on those fronts.