



On Communist informants, it's young versus old in Fidesz

With its proposal to fully release the files on informants working for the secret police under the communist regime, LMP has successfully driven a wedge between Fidesz and significant portions of the right-wing intelligentsia, as well as between the younger and older members of Fidesz' and KDNP's parliamentary factions. Fidesz has rejected LMP's proposal, but now finds itself under pressure to present its own version of disclosure. It appears that the governing party is uncomfortable with the issue, but it would be extremely risky to leave it unaddressed. Consequently, it has committed itself to finding a legal framework. To work fairly, the system determining which files and names to disclose will have to take many criteria into consideration, and some fear that the process may be abused or hampered by Fidesz for political gain or for averting political damage.

The question of whether to publish the files on informants for the communist secret police is a perennial issue in Hungarian politics, though for the most part it was a matter of intellectual debate: none of the major political players evinced a genuine interest in opening the files to the public. It appears, however, that LMP has managed to skilfully exploit the issue to hound Fidesz, highlighting the discrepancy between the latter's pugnacious anti-communist rhetoric and the reality of its unwillingness to commit to disclosure.

A few weeks ago, LMP's András Schiffer introduced a bill that would have satisfied the most radical demands by releasing every file. For all but two dozen MPs, the Fidesz and KDNP factions voted no, easily defeating the motion. Fidesz did not at first take an official position on the question, apparently hoping that it would go away quietly.

A successful wedge issue

That appeared too optimistic, however. LMP relentlessly castigates Fidesz' hypocrisy, and, more importantly for the government, a significant portion of the right-wing intelligentsia is grumbling as well. Especially among younger conservative intellectuals Fidesz' reluctance to embrace the issue met with consternation – the governing party's fierce anti-communism is one of the key drawing points for the young generation. Already before there was growing disenchantment in some segments of the conservative intelligentsia with the government's policies, but in light of Fidesz' inability to provide an unambiguous explanation for its refusal to follow LMP's suggestion, some have raised the question of how much remains that Fidesz is worth supporting for.

LMP's proposal not only pitted the party and portion of its intelligentsia against each other, but also internally divided the majority parliamentary factions. Like their counterparts outside Parliament, some younger MPs demanded that the issue be dealt with and that there be some disclosure of files at least. Fidesz' parliamentary leader János Lázár attacked LMP's proposal as "lacking credibility, unprofessional and hypocritical... like the party that introduced it". He also claimed that internally Fidesz had been debating the issue for over a year now and would soon present its own proposal.



How much disclosure?

The vexing question is what proportion of the vast archives should be disclosed and, even more importantly, what criteria – if any – the selection should be based on. Like other communist parties that ruled in the Central and Eastern European region, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) operated a gigantic network of informants, whose level of co-operation and enthusiasm differed widely. Many were blackmailed into informing with methods that would render at least some types of co-operation excusable – that is if the informant submitted useless reports, as some did.

In 2002 these dilemmas came to the fore when in an appalling political attack it was leaked that the father of Zoltán Pokorni (Fidesz' chairman at the time) had been reporting to the so-called division III/III, the hardcore of the state security business. Under tears, Pokorni related under how much pressure his father had been but nevertheless resigned all positions save his seat in Parliament, arguing that though morally he shared none of the blame for his father's actions, he would otherwise leave himself and Fidesz open to political attacks.

Tough issues

Given the complexities of why and how someone became an informant, ideally any disclosure scheme should take both the underlying personal situation and the level of co-operation into account, and try to shelter those whose transgression were minimal to none. Dragging the names of those through the mud who were under extreme duress and still co-operated only nominally would appear unfair. Moreover, in some cases it is even conceivable that names were added to the informant list even if the person in question did not co-operate at all. Finally, Fidesz argues that national security considerations must also be kept in mind, which is certainly a valid objection to full disclosure, though at first glance it is difficult to imagine reports that would still have national security ramifications.

Whatever standard one may apply, however, sifting through the archives and studying them with a view towards selecting names based on a set of criteria is bound to be immensely time-consuming and often inevitably arbitrary. How could any system of disclosure separate those that informed enthusiastically for ideological reasons or out of plain human malevolence or pettiness, as opposed to those reluctant co-operators who gave more or less useless reports and/or were subject to inhumane duress? What's a useless report and what constitutes non-co-operation? Also, who would perform the reviews and selection and what course of legal remedies would be open to those who feel that based on the legal criteria their names should not have appeared on the disclosure list?

Who guards the guardians?

It appears that Fidesz would like to establish a National Remembrance Commission to formulate a proposal on how to handle these difficult questions. One potential problem may arise if Fidesz will address the problem alone, without involving the opposition or independent experts. From the Media Council all the way to the Constitutional Court, there is a tendency in Fidesz to entrust key oversight functions exclusively to party loyalists, with reference to the governing parties' two-thirds majority.



If the selection of names is also performed by a bunch of party hacks, then that would seriously deligitimise the entire process. Many suspect that Fidesz' reluctance to embrace the issue has more to do with the number of persons in its ranks who might be affected by full disclosure than a genuine concern for unfair attacks on basically innocent persons. That is also why many, especially in the younger generation, argue for full disclosure.

Which way out

Ultimately, the dilemma is for Fidesz to resolve. It might decide that fully expropriating the selection process has smaller political costs than allowing independent experts and/or experts nominated by the opposition partake therein. Similarly to the Constitutional Court, the Media Council, etc., this, too is mainly an issue that is relevant to intellectuals rather than to the public at large. The difference to the previous "intellectual" issues, however, is that this time much larger segments of the right-wing have strong views on the question – views that tend to be at odds with what Fidesz does, though they may be more or less consistent with what it says. "Heed what I do, not what I say" was the prime minister's suggestion for interpreting his positions, and it seems that frustrated right-wingers are inclined to do so.

LMP has a keen political interest in keeping the issue on the agenda and Fidesz under attack. Given the lack of the affected generation in its ranks, it knows full well that only Fidesz and MSZP can suffer from potential revelations emerging from the fully disclosed archives. This is also an opportunity for the green party to appeal to those young voters who would like an alternative to Fidesz but have misgivings about LMP's ability or willingness to transcend the Hungarian left traditionally understood, as it was epitomised by MSZP and SZDSZ before 2010.

Sins of the father?

Small wonder then that the nerves are raw in Fidesz, which is one of the reasons why János Lázár chose to respond to LMP's proposal by attacking András Schiffer on account of the role Schiffer's grandfather played in the old regime. Lázár's verbally intense attack on Schiffer, denying the latter's right to advance such issues given his ancestry, invokes a mindset that Fidesz – in theory – does not embrace. Though significantly later Tibor Navracsics suggested that these kinds of probes into each other's ancestry are not the best way forward and called on everyone involved to chill, his is a personal opinion, while Lázár's statement – since reiterated – reflects the position of Fidesz, as whose leader he spoke in Parliament.

To avoid further embarrassments, politically speaking Fidesz would be well-advised to quickly remove the issue from LMP's grasp by setting up some type of disclosure arrangement. As the necessary corrections to the quickly adopted hundreds of laws show, however, producing quality legislation in short time is not Fidesz' forte. So political necessity might bode ill for a decent resolution of this complex and difficult issue.