

Policy Solutions' guide to a political summer in Hungary

If past summers are an indication, the next few weeks won't be very exciting politically speaking. But you never know, contentious issues have a tendency to arise surprisingly. We will be taking our summer break in July and early August, but we will review a few issues – the IMF, Fidesz' plans for reforming the law on electoral procedure and the culture wars - that may shape the political debate during this time.

Like most everywhere else, summer is the season in Hungary when political life is so mellow that “man bites dog” types of articles tend to predominate in the news. Parliament won't be in session, of course, thus removing the chances of some large-scale reform, and especially in early August most of the political class disappears, taking with them their gaffes and grand announcements. HPID, too, will be on vacation until political life returns after our national holiday on 20 August. Though we can't prepare our readers for the unexpected events this summer, here are a few issues that may figure prominently on the political agenda of the upcoming “politics-lite” phase.

Will the IMF finally come?

The IMF in Hungary has come to resemble Godot, constantly coming but never actually arriving. We've ourselves gone back and forth, expressing our pleasure on the government's willingness to compromise its economic plans for the sake of staving off a default, and then lamenting its retreat back into an obstinate rejectionism. So we won't be tricked into predicting an end to this sorry saga, but we are of course aware that the country is once again closer to the euphoric end of this perpetual cycle.

In celebration of the compromise on the central bank, the forint went into overdrive and is back at the customary peak that recurs whenever the IMF is rumoured to offer a credit. Analysts claim that both parties have softened sufficiently to make a deal likely and, moreover, the IMF is allegedly committed to ensure that Hungary won't be one of the dominoes that will either precipitate a wave of defaults or become a victim thereof. As far as the budget deficit is concerned, it appears to be finally under control, which the European Commission also acknowledged, also deciding that Hungary won't suffer any penalties in terms of its structural funds. Despite ominous news from all over Europe, the government is emphatically nonchalant, which is either hubris or a realistic appraisal of the more solid footing of Hungarian public finances than those of Europe's trouble economies.

Electoral procedure: finishing touches

As we have dutifully reported and analysed at each step, Fidesz has tinkered so much with the election law, one might figure it should be all done by now. One would be wrong. After the reforms of the municipal and parliamentary election laws, the law on electoral procedure still awaits a massive overhaul, and we might find out a lot about this over the summer. One idea that has been floated for a while now is the introduction of voluntary voter registration,

which would be extremely unusual in Europe – we are not even sure if there is a country in the EU where only voters who register before each election may participate.

The law on electoral procedure is full of mundane details, and at first glance is far less (or even less, if you prefer) exciting than, say, gerrymandering. Yet the mundane details might have an impact equalling or exceeding that of the more prominent issues that have been at the centre of public discourse thus far. This is especially true of registration, which could substantially depress already low voter turnout.

So much left to restrict

But there are plenty of other issues. Fidesz still has to reveal the deadline for collecting endorsement sheets, which qualify parties and candidates for the ballot. If the deadline will be exceedingly short, as many suspect – based also on the significantly shortened deadlines for municipal elections – then that could prematurely halt the emergence of new opposition parties, which would be unlikely to make it onto the ballot without adequate time to find citizens willing to endorse untested players. In fact, as the municipal election of 2010 showed, even parliamentary parties can struggle with the requirement; LMP failed to qualify in most of the country.

An important issue that is still outstanding is the regulation of campaign advertisements (and of course campaign finance, but that's a discussion for another week). It is likely that the regulation of campaign time and advertising rules will also attempt to track Fidesz' narrow interests, much like other regulations have thus far, though in this area Fidesz' interests are probably more difficult to define. What is near certain is that Hungary's version of the American superpacs, that is indirect campaign advertising disseminated by Fidesz-oligarchs, such as the vast poster campaign by the supermarket chain CBA in 2010 or the relentless Fidesz campaign in the shows of Echo TV, the channel owned by one of Hungary's richest entrepreneurs, Gábor Széles. Aside from indirect ads run by rich persons or enterprises (including state-owned enterprises), where Fidesz has a natural advantage, it might find that it has an interest in setting narrow rules for permissible ads run by parties, especially limiting advertisement in the internet, where the opponents might find it easiest and most cost effective to address voters. Furthermore, a shortening of the campaign time is intensely in Fidesz' interests, and it has already announced that this will occur: a shorter campaign primarily benefits those political players that are already known to voters, and unlike most of the opposition, Fidesz needs little introduction.

The culture wars continued

What will almost certainly continue over the summer are the culture wars. Of course they have been ongoing for an eternity now, nor are they likely to end anytime soon. To a greater or lesser extent, each government since transition has felt the need and the mandate to impose its own version of temporary cultural hegemony; they have sought to manifest their values through a variety of instruments, from street names over subsidies for culture and sciences all the way to school curricula. Fidesz has of course been active in this area from the very start, passing a wide variety of legislation – e.g. the Trianon memorial day, the

dual citizenship law and most importantly the new Fundamental Law – of high symbolic relevance.

Recently the governing party has turned up its war efforts, however. A crucial move was the legally enshrined culpability of the leading opposition party, MSZP, for the crimes committed by the ruling party – MSZP's legal predecessor – during the communist era. Fidesz has also moved against left-wing figures and symbols with the renaming of streets and the removal of monuments, and recently proposed to ban the remaining communist street names. At the same time as attacking the symbols attached to the left – and in the process seeking to conflate the post-communist (and occasionally pre-communist) left with the communist regime – Fidesz is pushing greater recognition of the right-wing heroes of Hungarian history, to create a more balanced approach towards history, as the speaker of Parliament, László Kövér, argues.

How much further?

It is not entirely clear why Fidesz has felt the need to intensify cultural warfare right now, but of the various explanations the pressure from Jobbik appear most plausible. This would also explain why Fidesz' efforts at giving greater prominence to historical right-wing political and cultural figures is reaching for role models ever further to the right. During Fidesz' first-term, the right-wing cult figures par excellence were the politician István Széchenyi and the novelist Sándor Márai – both uncontroversial choices, even for those who criticised the manner of their celebration or the monopolisation of their memory by the right. The figures elevated since then are known considerably better for their controversial views concerning fascism and Nazism than for their political or literary achievements, which even some on the right admit was mediocre at best in the case of the former Hungarian leader Miklós Horthy and the novelists Albert Wass and József Nyírő.

Especially in their communication with international figures, government politicians have sought to portray these efforts as either innocuous or beyond their control. László Kövér, for instance, has downplayed both Nyírő's documented exuberance for Nazism, as well as the actual extent of his new prominence: Nyírő's reburial was not a private matter, as Kövér suggests, but a political act whose weight stems precisely from the participation of senior political figures, Kövér among them. Prime Minister Orbán has said that he is not disturbed by the growing Horthy-mania, and argues that Fidesz-led municipalities which celebrate the authoritarian wartime leader are acting independently from – though not against – the party centre. Fidesz is certainly among the most hierarchical organisations in Hungary, however, and it is inconceivable that any such decisions would be made without approval from the chairman. Fidesz is clearly aiming to legitimise figures who were once associated with the far-right, and electorally this is a suave move: thanks in large parts to the groundwork provided by Fidesz' intelligentsia, the ideas that these historical personages represented are no longer at the fringes but in the mainstream of society. The question now is only how far Fidesz wants to take this process.