



HUNGARIAN POLITICS IN-DEPTH

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TOP 5 NEWS OF THE LAST TWO WEEKS

I. ORBÁN REFUSES TO DEBATE CHALLENGERS

It is hard to speak of established traditions in a relatively new democracy, but the fact is that until 2010 there had always been a televised debate between those with a realistic shot at the premiership, and in a more extensive circle in 1994. While he was caught up in competitive races, Viktor Orbán treated participation in these debates as natural. In 2010 and again this year, however, Fidesz has dismissed debate challenges, both from MSZP's Attila Mesterházy and Jobbik's Gábor Vona, arguing that neither of them merits the title of challenger to Orbán. This has elicited great outrage, especially on the left, where the prime minister was accused of cowardice.

That hardly explains Fidesz' decision, however. Orbán is arguably a fairly decent debater, though he was never far superior to any of his opponents (nor was his performance ever far inferior). In any case, the widespread perception among analysts was that he did lose the 2006 debate to Ferenc Gyurcsány, and some believe that Orbán's recent aversion to debates stems from this experience. It seems more likely though that Fidesz has realistically assessed that - just as in 2010 - it stands very little to gain from submitting to a debate in light of its huge lead in the polls. Allowing Mesterházy and/or Vona to challenge him on TV would raise - superfluously, from Fidesz' perspective - the stature of an opposition that lags far behind the governing party. The risk for Fidesz is greater than any potential benefit. Not only debates may legitimately be seen as a tradition in the post-1990 democratic system, voters also expect the candidates to appear together on TV. Ipsos says 62% of the population support the debate - even 53% of Fidesz-voters.

Therefore, in a close election, even Orbán would find it difficult to decline a debate challenge, but as long as Fidesz maintains a sizable lead, refusal is a rational choice. Somewhat surprisingly given Orbán's clear rejection, Jobbik's Chair Gábor Vona insists that he is going to debate Orbán on 4 April, which suggests that Jobbik is planning some sort of campaign stunt, for it is unlikely that Orbán would change his mind.

2. HIGH COURT CURBS SOME ELECTORAL ABUSES

In the middle of March Hungary's supreme court, the Curia, dealt the governing party two significant, though largely symbolic, blows. On March 17 the high court ruled that placing campaign posters on utility poles was legal, thus taking a position counter to the Constitutional Court's decision, which had rejected the opposition's constitutional complaint against a recent decree banning the practice. Though the Curia avoided the question of constitutionality, it did observe that the Constitutional Court's previous jurisprudence had treated the placement of posters as campaign activity that was protected by the principle of free speech. Now the Constitutional Court has to decide whether the Curia applied its jurisprudence more consistently than it did itself when it recently rejected a request of constitutional review.

The very next day, on 18 March, the Curia also interdicted the government's massive ad campaign promoting its successful policies on TV2. To recall, the government has effectively barred the opposition from screening ads on commercial television, but it has screened ads that are made to look exactly like Fidesz' own ads on TV2. This constituted party advertisement, the high court ruled, theoretically ending the practice and compelling TV2 to inform its viewers within three days of the Curia's decision (TV2 took substantially longer to comply with the verdict, only removing the ads once a slight majority in the Election Commission also voted that it had to stop). In the meanwhile, in a peculiarly Hungarian farce Fidesz "asked" the Prime Minister's office for permission to use the design and elements of its "Hungary does better" campaign for Fidesz' own election campaign, a request that the government has magnanimously granted. Apart from the questionable practice of transferring vast public funds - the campaign cost 800 million forints - to a political party to improve its position in the democratic competition, Fidesz' cynical manoeuvre also retrospectively confirms what critics have been saying all along: The campaign was designed to reflect Fidesz' own visual imagery in the first place, which makes it particularly adaptable to the governing party's campaign. On the plus side, the Curia has clearly exhibited an impressive willingness to confront the government on important symbolic issues.



3. WITH A MARCH, FIDESZ RALLIES THE TROOPS

In what the Fidesz-aligned Civil Alliance (CÖF) termed the most successful pro-government rally yet, few hundred thousand Fidesz supporters descended onto Budapest on Sunday to support Viktor Orbán going into the election. Since the non-partisan press has apparently withdrawn from the perennial game of trying to gauge attendance at political rallies, we do not have an impartial assessment of attendance at the so-called "Peace March". The Interior Ministry has estimated that some 450,000 persons attended, which would indeed imply a huge success. The organisers themselves spoke of up to a million, which was probably a wild but not unusual exaggeration. Orbán gave a solid speech, though at 45 minutes it was not really the appropriate length for a mass rally and reportedly taxed even some of his devoted followers' patience. Most importantly, the prime minister warned of complacency and the risks of taking victory for certain, factors that contributed to Fidesz' defeat in 2002. Back then, Fidesz' massive and successful pro-government rally came between the two rounds of the election, when it was too late to fully turn around its defeat in the first round. At this juncture, the danger is not so much an all-out defeat but rather the loss of the two-thirds majority and a low enough total to disappoint the all-conquering image Orbán has come to cultivate (and probably believe, too). Somewhat surprisingly, the event also featured an array of Fidesz' remaining friends in Europe, a few demonstrators carrying Polish flags and EPP President Joseph Daul. Given Fidesz' repeated casting of the EU in the role of hostile occupying power, letting Daul attend was an unusual choice, but the government has never been fully consistent in its anti-Europeanism.

4. OPPOSITION RALLY: NO SURPRISES, NO GLITCHES, SOME PIZZAZZ

The opposition held its final rally before the election on Sunday the 30th. The event was theoretically meant to replace the rally originally planned for March 15th – the anniversary of the 1848 revolution against the Habsburg Empire –, which had to be cancelled at the last minute due to storm warnings. Even though apparently the left-wing alliance lacked funds to bus in supporters from the countryside (many buses had been leased on the 15th, but the money was lost as the event was cancelled too late), attendance was healthy for the



standards of the Hungarian left: The organisers themselves claimed some 50,000 participants, and the press also estimated several 10,000. In any case, the numbers were not impressive enough to suggest that the left can draw on a pervasive anti-Orbán mood. But they do suggest that the parties of the left are now confident enough to put together a massive rally without hiding behind NGOs, as they had to in the first anti-Orbán mass demonstrations after 2010, when left-wing parties often failed to hold their own rallies and their supporters went to Milla gatherings instead. For the most part, the speeches focused on the theme that has tended to predominate over the past four years, that is the Orbán government's anti-democratic measures and attitude. Along with PM's Tímea Szabó, the left's candidate for the position of prime minister, Attila Mesterházy, was most vocal about bread and butter issues, devoting the overwhelming part of his speech to promises of more money to workers, pensioners and those on assistance, as well as more jobs. Altogether, the event might help in mobilising left-wing voters who may be tempted to stay home in light of their side's weak prospects.

5. GOOD MOOD IN CONSUMPTION A KEY DATA POINT TO EXPLAIN FIDESZ' POPULARITY

The string of good news for the government just can't cease. A few weeks before the election, the GKI Economic Research Institute - generally not considered a hotbed of pro-Fidesz activism - has published its regular figures on consumer and business confidence, both of which go a long way towards explaining Fidesz' strong standing in the polls despite a slew of information that significant segments of the intelligentsia consider alarming. Consumer confidence has reached pre-crisis levels and is at an eight year high, while even at its currently stagnating level, business confidence is "at a high last seen fourteen years ago". "In essence", GKI concludes, "an optimism last observed a decade and a half ago in Hungary continues unabated". Businesses are apparently more willing to hire and the public's fears of layoffs are also dropping. These figures have been steadily improving from the depressingly low levels in 2012. Even as late as a year ago, they were far from robust. Though their upward trend may continue, the current peak values come just at the right time for the government. Together with the fairly strong GDP growth rate, these buttress Fidesz' case

for its "unorthodox" economic policy. The left-wing opposition's warnings about the looming rise in the deficit and the lacking sustainability of Fidesz-created growth sounds to many like the whining of sore losers. Even if some or most of these warning are borne out by reality, that will be far too late to damage Fidesz' electoral prospects. If this mode persists until late autumn, then Fidesz will have the EP and the municipal elections wrapped up as well, with the result that it will have another four years to recover from whatever painful adjustments it might have to make early in its second term.



ANALYSIS: STATE OF THE RACE: JOBBIK GOING MAINSTREAM

As the election approaches, all major pollsters measure a significant decline in the proportion of undecided voters. It appears that the boon of new voters is going primarily to Jobbik, and to a lesser extent to LMP and Fidesz. The clear loser of the last week's trend is the left-wing alliance, which has suffered either a slight drop in support (according to Ipsos and Századvég) or a vast one (says Tárki), but is in any case far from being able to challenge the government. Tárki, which recently revamped its methodology to better capture the intentions of voters who appear unwilling to open up to pollsters, has observed an especially strong rise in Jobbik support and now projects a very tight race between the left-wing alliance and Jobbik for second place.

Ironically, there are two parallel developments going on that the left had anticipated and was banking on, but neither is benefiting it. For one, the hope was that as the election approaches the huge mass of undecideds would vastly break in favour of the opposition, thus reducing Fidesz' edge. Yet as previously undecided citizens are making up their mind, it appears that their voting intentions are roughly the same as the preferences of those who were decided all along. As we noted a few weeks ago, in order to tilt the race in its favour, the left would have had to dip into Fidesz' base in addition to claiming an overwhelming majority of undecideds. Neither has materialised.

Current polling figures of the four major institutes, for likely voters and the population at large¹

Institute	Fidesz		Alliance (MSZP-E14/PM-DK)		Jobbik		LMP	
	current	Change over previous poll	current	Change over previous poll	current	Change over previous poll	current	Change over previous poll
Medián (March 6) ²	49 (36)	-3 (-3)	30 (23)	0 (+1)	18 (14)	+4 (+4)	3 (3)	0 (+1)
Ipsos (March 13)	48 (32)	-3 (+2)	31 (23)	- 2 (0)	15 (11)	+2 (+2)	4 (4)	+2 (+2)
Tárki (March 26)	51 (38)	+2 (0)	21 (16)	-6 (-5)	20 (15)	+1 (0)	6 (4)	0 (0)
Századvég (March 27-30) ³	51 (33)	0 (+1)	25 (19)	-2 (-1)	18 (14)	+2 (+1)	5 (5)	0 (+1)

¹Figures in parentheses denote support in the population at large

²Unless otherwise indicated, dates refer to time of press publication.

³Dates of data collection.

The left's other hope was - and remains - that due to the repressive political atmosphere many voters simply do not speak openly to pollsters. Though no one knows how pervasive this phenomenon is, and we won't know until the actual election results come in, many political analysts agree that the phenomenon of "hiding voters" is real. Tárki's changed methodology, that is asking respondents to submit a secret ballot as if they were really voting rather than telling pollsters their preference, sought to account for this problem. Tárki's results suggest that there might have been indeed a contingent of hidden voters, except they were concealing their preference for far-right Jobbik rather than the left-wing alliance.

With only a week left to go, we would like to give caution its due (i.e. in politics anything is possible) but stress at the same time that the respective poll numbers of the government and the opposition are too far apart to warrant any other conclusion than Fidesz' safe re-



election, probably by a massive margin. Every act of popular decision-making involves an element of uncertainty, and there are some legitimate concerns that the political climate has become repressive, maybe to the degree that certain segments of the electorate feel uncomfortable sharing their political preferences even under conditions that are theoretically designed to protect their anonymity. But the four major polling institutes' assessments of likely voters are too close to one another to suggest that any of them have captured a major alternative "truth" that the others are missing. Though it is true that pollsters differ most significantly when it comes to the left-wing alliance, none of them project a very successful showing for the left. This proximity in the current projections also rules out the possibility that any of the pollsters is manipulating its figures to any relevant degree. Even if they all miss some giant sleeper bloc, that can't conceivably be large enough to allow for anything else than a Fidesz victory.

Despite the most important question already being resolved, there are several that remain. Will Fidesz win another two-thirds majority in Parliament, despite a very likely drop in its support as compared to 2010? Will the left-wing alliance win enough votes for Attila Mesterházy to claim that even though victory has been missed, the left has been rehabilitated and is on its way to re-establishing its position as the only viable alternative to Fidesz? Will Jobbik improve on its impressive 2010 tally and maybe even take second place? Will LMP be back in Parliament despite the loss of a key segments of its urban base?

Especially Jobbik's recent surge raises serious questions, not only because of the party's hostile attitude to minorities and many key aspects of democracy. The other major question is whether Jobbik's persistent strength will also lastingly impede the left's ability to reclaim the position of the alternate party of power. There is a point at which Jobbik could become a serious thorn in Fidesz' side, but for now its rise is a blessing for the governing party, since it successfully splits anti-government sentiment. Tárki's recent survey showed that those who wish to oust Fidesz support the left-wing alliance to roughly the same degree (38%) as Jobbik (32%). Given the imperative to win single-member constituencies, up to a point Fidesz benefits more from being slightly ahead of a divided opposition than more clearly ahead of a unified opposition. While both would imply victories, a united opposition would capture many more single-member constituencies and reduce Fidesz' margin in Parliament.



Moreover, if the opposition fails to consolidate anti-Fidesz support far more effectively than hitherto, then it will never be able to cut into Fidesz' majority to a degree that could actually jeopardise the latter's control of Parliament. In other words as long as new anti-government voters will split roughly equally between the left and Jobbik, Fidesz' buffer is much larger than if these voters all went the same way. A future scenario where Fidesz could capture a majority in Parliament even with a rather weak result of 35-40% is theoretically conceivable under such conditions (cf. the UK, in 2005 and 2001, for example). The intense rejection of both Jobbik and MSZP in large segments of the electorate is a major blessing to Fidesz.

A precondition for maintaining this state of affairs is "mainstreaming" Jobbik to some extent, that is rendering it palatable to larger swathes of the electorate. Many factors facilitate this. For one, in significant part due to the role played by the far-right segment of the Fidesz-aligned media, public discourse in Hungary has shifted decisively to the right. Extreme versions of nationalism, authoritarian values, hostility to the West and resentment towards minorities are commonplace in several nationally marketed media outlets affiliated with the mainstream right (e.g. *Demokrata*, *Magyar Hírlap* and *Echo TV*), and they do crop up even in the right's flagship daily, *Magyar Nemzet*. While most of these outlets are staunchly anti-Jobbik, that's a matter of party preference (and funding) rather than ideology. They played a significant role in creating the educated segment of Jobbik's base, and through their impact on public discourse they are also instrumental in convincing the general public that ideas that used to be far-right are in fact at home at the centre of society. The benefit for Fidesz is that even if at some point these voters do become dissatisfied with Fidesz' governance for, say, material reasons, they might well gravitate towards Jobbik.

The other side of mainstreaming is at this point coming from Jobbik itself. For years, the party has resisted the temptation to moderate its tone in the interest of capturing voters who have reservations about radicalism. Now, too late to turn the election but in time to improve its performance, Jobbik has toned down the extremist rhetoric and is openly trying to woo voters closer toward the centre of an electorate that has shifted decisively to the right over the past years.



And its communication efforts are increasingly helped by segments of the mainstream media, which are resolving the dilemma of "how do we handle the far-right" by treating it just as another political player. In particular, they feature lifestyle stories involving far-right politicians showing them as everyday folks "like the rest of us." Probably unwittingly, but in trying to cosy up to their own far-right readers - or seeking to draw new ones -, these outlets are driving home the very idea that despite stigmatising minorities, dubious comments about key constitutional values and democracy, as well as a hostility towards western integration, Jobbik is in fact just like any other political party. Unlike the Jobbik's more radical ideas, which offer very limited possibilities of expanding the party's base, mainstreaming offers vast unexplored reserves of voters.

Finally, a note on the left. We have argued before that for Attila Mesterházy the relevant issue is not victory but managing expectations. The left needs to be perceived to have improved "sufficiently" over 2010, which is a relative and shifting target. In a way, the good news for the left-wing alliance is that the developments of the last few weeks have driven expectations down significantly. The bad news for the left is that expectations appear to be moving in tandem with poll numbers. So there is an opportunity here, but it presumes that either the polls err to the left's disadvantage or that the last few days of the campaign will see a significant mobilisation on the left. As recently as February, with poll numbers regularly around or over 30%, it seemed that Mesterházy was fairly well-buffered against a massive disappointment. Avoiding a calamity is no longer a certainty, however.

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