



HUNGARIAN POLITICS IN-DEPTH

SPECIAL EDITION

POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN HUNGARY - HOW REFUGEES HALT FIDESZ'S DECLINE -

Fidesz and the 'average Hungarian'

There is no politician in Hungary with **such an amazing knack for what the Hungarian public wants** – or is at least willing to tolerate – as **Prime Minister Viktor Orbán**. He might have narrowly lost two winnable elections in 2002 and 2006, but at the same time he built a marginal and culturally ill-fitting party into one that is **fundamentally attuned to the preferences of the Hungarian public** and has successfully challenged a previously vastly larger, more established and far richer political organisation, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). Along with a manipulation of the democratic system (between 2011 and 2014), this was enough to give Fidesz successive supermajorities (2010 and 2014) in the Hungarian Parliament. This owed in large parts to **Viktor Orbán's and his advisers' feel for issues that might resonate with the Hungarian public, from state interventions in the market to stirring public resentments against foreign influences.**

Since last fall, however, Fidesz appeared to be increasingly hapless when it came finding issues that the public fancied. The government's attempt to **focus public discourse on the perceived perils of the refugee stream appeared destined to fail as well.** Hungary was not considered a popular refugee destination, and there was no indication that the public – where resentments against some indigenous minorities run fairly high – was much concerned about the issue.

Then the refugees arrived...

Suddenly, however, the **issue erupted as a top concern all across Europe**, with headlines proclaiming unprecedented waves of refugees reaching the continent, and **it turned**



out that Fidesz had struck gold with the issue. The government has reinvigorated its rhetoric on the refugee issue and with news pouring in every day about hundreds (sometimes thousands) of illegal refugees being caught at the border, **Orbán announced the building of a giant fence to keep them out.** This could be ineffective as many critics suggest, but is of course **highly symbolic** (and most likely that is exactly its purpose) as a gesture that naturally exudes the **promise of protection** and is also a very palpable action, which contrasts highly with the suggestion that the opposition is either full of talk on the issue (the far-right Jobbik) or downright hostile to Hungarian interests (the Left).

‘Cue the refugees’

Importantly for Orbán and Fidesz, **the issue and its political communication is likely to yield political dividends in terms of halting Fidesz's steep decline in the polls –** which has already taken a practical toll, **since the governing party was recently defeated in two by-elections in districts it had easily carried in 2014,** also losing its hallowed two-thirds majority in the process. However, the most recent polls show some growth (or stagnation) in Fidesz's support – given Fidesz's loss of support in recent months, even that is not bad. Jobbik's seemingly inexorable rise, by contrast, is on pause, at least for now. **Even if Fidesz has "only" halted Jobbik's momentum and stopped its own freefall, that is a significant development.**

Does the opposition walk into a trap?

Apart from ‘lucky’ timing and a recognition that this issue would work, Fidesz was also helped in exploiting the refugee problem by the reactions of its competitors. From the very first moment, the opposition played right into Fidesz's hands. The initial reaction on all sides was bewilderment: why would Fidesz pick this obscure and hardly relevant issue? **Even Jobbik, which would ordinarily have been more than happy to pile on, failed to grasp that the refugee issue was going to be big.** Rather than belittling the government's anti-refugee efforts and sounding even shriller alarms, the initial Jobbik reaction – similar to parts of the left – was that Fidesz was blowing the issue out of proportion and that its handling of the question was embarrassing and over the top.

The left was vacillating between protesting the government's stigmatisation of migrants and arguing that the problem was irrelevant. The emphasis on the humanitarian aspect was especially pronounced in the left-wing intelligentsia, parts of which engaged in an unusually energetic and creative campaign to counter Fidesz's anti-refugee rhetoric. But the parties, too, made clear that they did not agree with efforts to rebuild the government's popularity at the expense of an extremely vulnerable group.



By the time the fence was announced, it had become obvious that the issue was gaining more traction with voters than the opposition had anticipated, and the emphases of opposition criticisms shifted to the argument that the fence won't work. Though this may well be true, but it does little to disguise the fact that while **Fidesz took a successful political strategic approach to handling the issue, both Jobbik and the left were reduced to reacting to an environment they had failed to anticipate.** Even now, several weeks after the relevance of the issue became obvious, the opposition parties still lack a coherent and persuasive alternative narrative/approach.

Losers all around

Though a few weeks ago it has seemed that the only loser of Fidesz's anti-refugee campaign would be the opposition, **by today the situation has become too complex for such a simple verdict.** Fidesz had only **prepared for the current situation at the level of communication,** without making any practical arrangements to actually handle the logistical and other issues that arise from the vastly increased numbers of new refugees. Since it emerged that the PR instruments (billboards, fence) were not effective enough, Hungarians see that thousands of new refugees gather at train stations and other points in major cities, while, unfortunately, **the government appears increasingly helpless as well.** Fidesz looks upon this issue as a clear communications victory, but **in the long run the governing party might well fall into a trap of its own making** -- at the very point when the anti-refugee rhetoric dominates the public agenda, it emerges that Fidesz in fact has no practical solution to the problem. **But those who stand to lose most from the current scenario are unfortunately the refugees themselves,** who are caught between a society that has been incited to reject them for months and an institutional framework that is ill-prepared to handle such masses.

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