

Rethinking the Far Right in Hungary:

Defeating Orbán is Impossible without Jobbik's Votes

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While the general view in Hungarian progressive and liberal circles, as well as in other European countries has generally been that Viktor Orbán is a guarantee against the Hungarian Far Right, in this paper I will argue that it is no longer the case.

I will underline this argument on the basis of three points:

- Viktor Orbán and Fidesz have become more radical than the far-right Jobbik party on numerous issues.
- Fidesz is more of a threat to democracy and the integrity of the EU these days than Jobbik, and 2018 might be the last chance to defeat Orbán.
- The Hungarian Left is mathematically unable to defeat Fidesz alone – Jobbik's votes and mandates are needed to deny Fidesz the majority of seats in the National Assembly. Of course, Jobbik still keeps large chunks of its former radicalism, so arguments about the price of coordinating or cooperating with Jobbik in any forms are valid.

1. Fidesz has become more radical than the far-right Jobbik on numerous issues

Since the second Orbán government was elected in 2010, the political landscape in Hungary has been characterized by the permanent presence of a populist right-wing party (Fidesz) and an extreme right-wing party (Jobbik). But times are changing. Jobbik and Fidesz have practically traded places. This is the consequence of two parallel tendencies: Fidesz's shift to the right and Jobbik's turn towards the centre.

First, Fidesz has been gradually shifting to an increasingly authoritarian, illiberal right-wing position, which accelerated in 2015 at the beginning of the refugee crisis. Viktor Orbán is the only political leader in Central and Eastern Europe who is not just constructing an illiberal regime, using Russia as a model, but also proudly labels it 'illiberal'. Domestically, Fidesz implemented most of the measures proposed by Jobbik between 2010 and 2014.

However, a number of things changed after Orbán's re-election in 2014. First, Orbán decided to launch his personal 'freedom fight', getting rid of the oligarchic structures that constrained him and replacing them with structures more loyal to him. Viktor Orbán's war with his previously favoured oligarch, Lajos Simicska, began in 2015, when the prime minister tried to sideline previously the most then on, Simicska started to support Jobbik, then the strongest opposition party. Fidesz, feeling threatened, turned against the far-right party. Coincidentally, soon after that the refugee crisis broke out, and Hungary became one of the front-line states on the Balkans Route. The increasingly unpopular Orbán grasped his big opportunity to take back political control and regain popularity by playing the role of the crusader, keeping Muslims away from Hungary and Europe. Consequently, Fidesz became a genuine far-right party as it put xenophobia at the heart of its politics – even according to some most notable scholars of the Far Right, including Cas Mudde.

At the same time, Jobbik has gradually been moving towards the centre since 2013. The lead-

er of the party since 2006, Gábor Vona – who gave the party momentum by expressing hatred against Roma and politicians, and formed the party's paramilitary wing, the Hungarian Guard – decided to bring his party closer to the political mainstream, hoping to be able to replace Fidesz after the 2018 general election. The party, following the examples of the French far-right leader Marine Le Pen and Serbian President Alexander Vucic, was successfully and substantially re-branded in a few years.

Before 2013, Jobbik was the most rejected party, according to polls. Today, the Socialist Party is subject to far more hostility from voters than Jobbik. This 'centrist shift' is far from being completely consistent. Although some extremist politicians (Előd Novák, former vice president) have been sidelined, others are still in leading positions (for example, László Toroczkai, mayor of Ásotthalmó). Vona's intention to occupy the centre of the political spectrum that Fidesz has abandoned seems to be genuine. His motivations are, beyond doubt, rational and self-interested: to gain government power. Nevertheless, his efforts have brought about a substantial change in the parties' politics and policies: Jobbik has turned down the volume of hate speech and has transformed itself into a pro-European party from a party that was burning EU flags just a few years ago. Its main topics are no longer refugees or Roma anymore, but corruption, education and health care. Recently Jobbik even defended the Central European University (CEU) and voted against the law that aims to restrict it, criticized the Hungarian government's anti-Soros campaign and also voted against the NGO law, which is pretty similar to the Russian legislation on 'foreign agents' – even though it had drafted a similar bill quite recently. On most issues, Jobbik takes a softer approach than Fidesz these days.

The real moments of truth lie in parliamentary debates. In the National Assembly, Orbán has repeatedly attacked Vona for being too soft, and has also suggested he is gay, a view Orbán's propaganda machine is trying to spread in order to discredit Vona in the eyes of his supporters.

There are practically too far-right parties in Hungary today: a genuine one and a softer version. Fidesz and Jobbik. Jobbik is only 'Fidesz light' these days – but that makes it far less dangerous to democracy than Fidesz.

2. Fidesz is more of a threat to democracy than Jobbik nowadays

In recent years, Fidesz has built up a highly efficient, nepotistic corruption machine. Furthermore, with the help of EU funds, it has built up an unprecedentedly powerful business empire in Hungary – a structure that would remain in place even after a change of government.

On top of that, Orbán weeded out practically all institutional elements hostile to him, as well as the consensual approach of the German political system that had previously characterized Hungarian politics to a certain extent since the democratic transition. The Constitutional Court has almost become a puppet of the government and the mixed electoral system has been shifted towards a majoritarian one. His measures have led to an unprecedented concentration of the media in Hungary; he has made the Chief Prosecutor's Office his extended hand; and he makes every effort to suppress civil society. The harm Fidesz has done to Hungarian democracy is worse than that of any government since the transition. Furthermore, a destructive campaign is ongoing against the European Union, blaming 'Brussels' as the puppet of George Soros for every ill in the world and making it the centre of conspiracy theories.

Jobbik, even on government, would have no tools to further erode democracy. They have no economic background and no external and political support comparable to that of Fidesz. Furthermore, while Fidesz is a member of the European People's Party, Jobbik is at the margins of European politics – even the far-right EP group Europe of Nations and Freedom refused to include them. This means that they should do everything they can to calm the nerves of the international community by demonstrating they are no longer extremist and generally 'being a good boy' in the eyes of the world. The lack of an institutional po-

litical umbrella provided by a mainstream European party group can, paradoxically, serve as a moderating factor.

Also, Jobbik, when in power, would not intend to erode democratic institutions further. While some assume that Jobbik's hidden agenda is to implement its 'original' racist programme, once in government, it would be too much of a risk. More likely, they would follow a more moderate, more predictable centrist political line to secure the support of the mainstream.

But what is important to underline: a coordination with Jobbik does not necessarily mean giving them the executive power.

3. The Hungarian Left is mathematically unable to defeat Fidesz alone

As Orbán's illiberal state continues to be built at an increasing pace, 2018 might be the last chance to defeat it. The 2014 elections were highly unfair, albeit still 'free', but the 2018 general election will be even more unfair and its degree of freedom highly questionable. Due to regulations introduced by Fidesz, opposition parties are unable to reach the electorate through political advertisements via television, while the government is pushing its narrative frantically, on every front. Opposition parties are singled out by the Prosecutor's Office and by the State Audit Office as well. Jobbik is not an exception but the rule – one Hungarian government-organized think tank raised the issue of banning the party, as they think Jobbik's party finances are not transparent enough. Also, Jobbik received the biggest fine from the State Audit Office – more than 2 million euros, for highly questionable reasons.

There is an even larger problem. Fidesz's supporters easily outnumber the supporters of Hungarian left-wing and liberal parties. According to a recent poll by Závecz Research Institute, Fidesz has 50 per cent of the votes among certain voters with a preferred party. The Hungarian Left has close to 35 per cent – and leftist forces are more divided than ever, with questionable willingness for stepping back. Jobbik is favoured by almost 15 per cent of voters. It means that Jobbik and the left-liberal opposition together could have more

votes than Fidesz alone. It can be a huge asset in the individual constituencies. It was already the case in 2014: only in 26 out of 106 (!) single-member constituencies was Fidesz able to win an absolute majority; in 80 individual constituencies, opposition voters simply outnumbered Fidesz voters.

Given the divisions among and general ineptitude of the Hungarian Left, however, it seems highly unlikely that they can close the huge gap in the polls to defeat Fidesz alone. Therefore, if a change of government is the goal, the only possible way to defeat Fidesz would be for opposition parties to compete with separate lists but coordinate with each other in single-member constituencies. The results of previous by-elections and recent polls also show that there is an increasing willingness among voters of the Left to vote tactically for a Jobbik candidate if they feel this is the way to defeat Fidesz. This is a trend observed among Jobbik voters as well, albeit to a smaller extent. However, generally, we can say that the psychological barriers that divide the two camps are becoming lower.

Taking into consideration the 5 per cent parliamentary threshold in Hungarian elections and the divided opposition, the presence of over three party lists would be problematic, as it would lead to too many lost votes. Two opposition lists on the Left (one forming around LMP, the green party, and one around MSZP, the socialist party), and that of Jobbik, though, could coordinate activities efficiently in single-member constituencies – otherwise they will knock each other out and Fidesz can win once again even if they gain only a minority of the vote. Given that only 27 individual candidates are needed to have a national party list, the coordination would be even possible with more party lists.

The minimal degree of cooperation would be that (a) left-wing opposition parties do not field individual candidates against each other, and (b) they do not field strong candidates with a lot of financial resources in constituencies where the chance for Jobbik to win is high – and vice versa. This kind of cooperation does not even necessarily need any background discussion – the parties already know

who would have a better chance to win and where. A higher level of cooperation – although it seems unlikely at the moment – would involve Jobbik and left-wing parties not fielding individual candidates against each other in the constituencies where the other has a better chance to win.

But if all this is so easy, what is stopping the political parties from doing it? First, they are afraid of political attacks from Fidesz for cooperating with the other side. But they will be attacked anyway. In fact, they are already subject to attacks. Second, they are afraid of the political repercussions: losing voters who cannot accept such cooperation. This might happen, but still there would be more chance to defeat Fidesz. And third, there is a strong disincentive for political parties to step back in favour of each other. The Hungarian electoral system, tailor-made to fit Orbán's goals, gives considerably more money to parties that field more individual candidates. Besides receiving HUF 1 million (approximately 3200 EUR) for every individual candidate, the parties that field only the 27 individual candidates required to have a national party list receive only HUF 150 million, while they receive four times as much – HUF 600 million – if they field candidates in every single-member constituency. This makes a big difference for opposition forces that are not doing well financially, therefore the system pushes opposition forces to maximize the number of their individual candidates.

Conclusions and recommendations

Some argue that if Fidesz lost its parliamentary majority, it could result in a chaotic and unpredictable situation in which opposition forces are unable to cooperate, and thus they would have a very difficult time governing the country. And they are right: this is a possible scenario. Also, Jobbik, even today, is far from being an ideal coordination or cooperation partner for progressive forces, even if it does not lead to governance.

But even in its worst case, a weak and slightly chaotic government can be a far better option for the country than an extremely strong government with authoritarian tendencies that is actively de-

stroying the remnants of a fragile Hungarian democracy – and which serves as a model for other countries in the region, such as Poland. Coordination with Jobbik is not an ideal approach – but it much more fits the realities than the notion of the left is defeating Fidesz alone.

The Hungarian case is in some ways similar to Ukraine in the times of the Maidan. To replace and to oust Yanukovich's corrupt regime, the democratic opposition clearly needed the support of the forces of the nationalist right such as Svoboda. In the course of the next few years, the political far right has practically been sidelined. Is the current Ukrainian situation perfect? Very far from it, even if we do not consider Russia's aggressive moves. But still better than the Yanukovich regime.

German foreign policy, and even German Social Democrats should change their approach when it comes to the far right in Hungary. Jobbik is no longer a genuine, hardcore far right party – but Fidesz is. Jobbik is no longer a real threat to democracy – but Fidesz is. Jobbik, abandoning its anti-gipsy and anti-semitic rhetoric endangers much less ethnic relations than Fidesz, fuelling hatred against refugees. Jobbik is not the party that poses a real threat to EU membership, while Fidesz is the major party in a government that aims to destroy the European Union (and with the aid of EU funds). Fidesz is no longer a guarantee against the Far Right – it now is the Far Right. Thus when we consider strategies to repulse the Far Right, we should primarily think about strategies to repulse Fidesz.

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