



Why should the left-wing opposition in Hungary not work together with the far-right Jobbik party?

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Many argue that the democratic opposition parties in Hungary should work together with Jobbik to bring down the Fidesz government. Jobbik is seen as more moderate and less of a threat to democracy. However, I dispute this argument:

- The Fidesz government has essentially co-opted the Jobbik program of government. On the most important questions the Fidesz and Jobbik positions are essentially identical. A Jobbik government or a coalition government with Jobbik would merely represent a change of personnel, not of regime or attitude.
- The leader of Jobbik has certainly moderated his earlier rhetoric, but the party practices a 'division of labour;' many of his deputies still keep the core voters on-side by using the same radical language as ever. Jobbik is not simply burdened by its racist past, but also by its present.
- Any coalition established between the left-wing parties and Jobbik would soon collapse on the basis of fundamental, irreconcilable differences, opening the way for an invigorated Fidesz to recapture power and – by appearing the only group capable of governing Hungary – entrench their control in the long term. The left, meanwhile, would lose a significant number of supporters, being both morally and politically stigmatised.

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Introduction

Péter Krekó¹ has written a reflective essay arguing that the democratic opposition parties should work together with Jobbik to bring down the Fidesz government. The essence of his argument is that Fidesz, far from standing as a guarantee against a far-right breakthrough, has in fact become a far-right party itself. A more moderate Jobbik, meanwhile, would be less of a threat to democracy. Though we both share the same starting premise – namely that Fidesz is drifting ever-further to the right – I nevertheless dispute his conclusions:

1. The Fidesz government has essentially co-opted the Jobbik program of government. On the most important questions the Fidesz and Jobbik positions are essentially identical. A Jobbik government or a coalition government with Jobbik would merely represent a change of personnel, not of regime or attitude.
2. The leader of Jobbik has certainly moderated his earlier rhetoric, but the party practices a ‘division of labour;’ many of his deputies still keep the core voters on-side by using the same radical language as ever. Jobbik is not simply burdened by its racist past, but also by its present, as evidenced by many of its recent publications, while the organizing committee can remove Gábor Vona (the leader of Jobbik) at any time if they feel he has become too moderate.
3. Any coalition established between the left-wing parties and Jobbik would soon collapse on the basis of fundamental, irreconcilable differences, opening the way for an invigorated Fidesz to recapture power and – by appearing the only group capable of governing Hungary – entrench their control in the long term. The left, meanwhile, would lose a significant number of supporters, being

both morally and politically stigmatised, and by throwing away any remaining trust in their ability to govern they would sacrifice even the moral force to play a counterbalancing role in Hungarian politics.

Identical Positions by Fidesz and Jobbik

The idea of an anti-Fidesz alliance with Jobbik has been raised by democratic thinkers though a poisonous mixture of hope and hopelessness. Hopelessness, because the democratic support base is not growing fast enough, and indeed we have seen little change recently. Hope, because there is a sense that at all costs the situation cannot be allowed to remain as it presently is; something has to happen.

We often hear it said that we should be willing to ally with ‘the devil himself’ to oppose Orbán, just as Churchill allied with Stalin in the fight against Hitler. Churchill, however, would not have invited Stalin to govern Great Britain in coalition, nor made any domestic concessions to his views.

I am not, of course, attempting to draw any parallel between either Orbán or Vona and Stalin or Hitler. They do not resemble these historical figures, but do indeed resemble one another. Exchanging a Fidesz government for a Jobbik government would mean nothing more than a change in personnel. True, it might mean removing the group which is presently the most corrupt, but would not alter in the slightest the regime’s governing ideology, nor its foreign or domestic policies. It would not be a tool of democratic change, but a barrier to it. Péter Krekó is right at least that the Jobbik leader has brought his party a little way from the far right towards the centre, but this simply means that they now occupy almost precisely the same space on the political chessboard as Fidesz. The two parties’ policies are virtually indistinguishable to the naked eye. What would be the good of allying with one Fidesz to bring down the other? It is not the person of Orbán who is the true enemy, but rather the system, and the ideology of that system is not opposed by Jobbik in any significant aspect (with the possible exception of corruption.)

¹ See the paper “Rethinking the Far Right in Hungary: Defeating Orbán is Impossible without Jobbik’s Votes” written by Péter Kréko, Director of the Political Capital Institute in Budapest, also published by the Budapest Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

It has been shown many times that Fidesz, winning the last election without a real program for government, in fact implemented the larger part of Jobbik's manifesto. This includes the continual references to the Holy Crown, the bogus historicism of the constitution, the undermining of the principle of separation between church and state, the strong current of anti-liberalism, the denigration of 'alternative forms of cohabitation,' or non-heterosexual relationships, the degrading family policies, the homophobia, the shortening and dumbing-down of training programs at vocational schools, the replacement of a 'one-sided Euro-Atlantic orientation' with an 'eastward opening,' the creation of a cult-like June 4th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Trianon, the rechristening of Roosevelt Square, the rehabilitation of the interwar Horthy government, the cult of anti-Semitic writers such as József Nyírő, Albert Wass and Cecil Tormay, the raid on private pension funds, and the suggested reintroduction of the death penalty. These are unacceptable policies, and they remain so whether implemented by Orbán or by anyone else.

Jobbik remains a far right party

Despite its much-vaunted moderation, Jobbik has not repudiated these principles in any way. Through a division of labour which may be conscious or spontaneous, Gábor Vona courts voters from an apparently moderate centre-ground, while his deputies continue to offer the same radical objectives and rhetoric to 'placate' their traditional base. These deputies were chosen by the supposedly 'moderating' Vona, and not simply inherited from some more radical period in the past. The party's former vice-president László Toroczkai, now mayor of Ásotthalom, passed an ordinance forbidding same-sex couples from any 'displays of affection' in the streets of the town, as well as organising a local chapter of the outlawed 'Hungarian Guard' organisation. Vice-president Volner continues to promise that if Jobbik comes to power they will once more legalise the Hungarian Guard, an organisation notorious for its persecution of Roma people, maintaining that this accords well with their new self-description as the 'party of the people.' At a multi-party conference towards

the end of the summer, a Jobbik representative expressed his support for the construction of the Paks 2 nuclear plant with Russian investment. While Vona truly has been at pains recently to avoid any open anti-Semitism in his rhetoric, a newly-elected regional director recently called for the exclusion of Jews from public life. He was swiftly removed from his position, but many continue to make excuses for the argument proposed by one of their parliamentary representatives, calling for a list of Jews in parliament. Another Jobbik representative recently launched an initiative to tighten voting laws, with a plainly anti-Roma purpose, and the party has said nothing in opposition to these plans. Neither have they broken their ties to racist satellite organisations (the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement etc.), the leaders of which often take part in Jobbik events.

Jobbik is just as xenophobic, close-minded, anti-refugee and hate-generating as Fidesz, and in these respects – while it still does not burn EU flags – it stands in sharp opposition to EU norms and policies, as well as more general principles such as tolerance, pluralism and openness. While no longer calling for immediate EU withdrawal, Jobbik is still opposed to any further EU integration, and supported the government position in the recent referendum on Brussels and the acceptance of refugees. On their own posters they promise that if they were in power not a single refugee would cross the border. Vona himself declared George Soros a 'persona non grata' while it was a female Jobbik member who first called for all NGOs supported by George Soros' foundation to be banned.

The greatest crime of the present regime has been the seeds of hatred and stigmatisation they have so carelessly sown. Should be now endure another party adding their own similar stereotypes to the mix? If the democratic parties indulge or endorse this, even calling for Jobbik candidates to be elected in certain districts, where is the guarantee that this will only be temporary? What is to say the voter will not remain permanently wedded to those who seem to offer such simple solutions to complex problems? If it is 'ok' to vote for Jobbik once, why not again? What would we say in those districts

either tacitly or openly shared with Jobbik? 'Vote Toroczkai to get rid of Orbán'? And later, if this strategy were to prove rather too successful and left-wing voters strengthen Jobbik, would we then say 'vote Orbán to get rid of Toroczkai'?

I admit the truth in Péter Krekó's argument, that the leader of Jobbik truly is attempting to make his party acceptable to the political centre-ground. This, however, still leaves unbridgeable points of principle between Jobbik and the democratic opposition: Jobbik wants closer friendship with Putin, and an eastward rather than westward orientation, while though no longer explicitly anti-EU, their Euroscepticism and xenophobia indicate no real change from the present regime. In any case, this vaunted 'moderation' is only apparent in Vona's speeches; there is no guarantee that it would endure for long.

A coalition soon to collapse

If an alliance with Jobbik is insufficient to actually win the election, then all we are left with is shame and disgrace. If it is sufficient to win, that might prove worse still. How should we ever work together, even on a temporary basis? Some argue that it would be enough to pass 'just' one or two laws, mostly a rapid change in the electoral system, before dissolving this perverse coalition and calling new elections. This is a delusion. In order to make the voting laws more equitable, the Fundamental Law also has to be changed. From its first minute in power, a new government – in addition to reforming the constitution – will have to pass a budget, a tax plan, preparatory rules for the academic year etc., as well as dealing with international affairs. Jobbik, however, are in favour of school segregation, the Paks nuclear plant, as well as discrimination against Roma and those judged 'undeserving' in their social and family-planning schemes. Where is there any room for compromise or agreement here? You get to introduce an anti-gypsy law, in exchange for some pro-European legislation? You get to remove a few statues, or daub them with red paint, or pin a kippah on their heads (as has been done on numerous occasions to memorials for left-wing or liberal figures), while in

return the left-wing government members get to raise the family allowance for every child? A Miklós Horthy Street in exchange for an Imre Nagy Square?

Such a government would inevitably collapse, allowing Fidesz to return in triumph and announce that they were the only ones never to have made a pact with Jobbik.

True, it will be much harder to achieve a majority without Jobbik. For that reason, I do not reproach those who argue for such cooperation. There are times, however, when we must choose the harder road, for the seemingly easier one leads only to shame and failure. Furthermore, the harder road is not impassable. The interim elections showed that many voters wanting a change of government were willing to transfer their votes, right to left or left to right, from the left wing parties to the Jobbik candidate and vice-versa, depending on which party was stronger in which district. The conclusion we ought to draw from this, however, is not that we should cast aside our whole worldview at a national level, embracing all opposition candidates regardless of their worldview and beliefs. Rather, we should ensure that in every district, the democratic candidate appears the strongest. (All the more so since polls show that Jobbik voters are more likely to vote for democratic candidates than vice-versa.) This is not impossible if the democratic opposition parties can agree not to field competing candidates, and can run a serious, coordinated campaign. Already it is the case that these democratic parties together have a stronger support base than Jobbik, but the present divisions and infighting within the democratic camp make such close collaboration difficult to envision. Still, it remains easier than governing while tied to Jobbik in a perverse coalition.

About the author

Ildikó Lendvai was born in 1946 in Debrecen, and graduated from Eötvös Loránd University with a degree in Hungarian history and philosophy. She was one of the founding members of (MSZP) and first president of the women's branch of the party. She was a member of the Hungarian Parliament from 1994 to 2014, and was leader of the MSZP parliamentary delegation between 2002 and 2009. From 2009 to 2010 she was the President of the Hungarian Socialist Party.

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