

The rise of right-wing populism in Hungary

Abstract

This article reviews the recent elections in Hungary from the particular perspective of the decline in electoral support for the social democratic party (MSZP) and the rise of the right-wing, in particular the far-right Jobbik party. Hungary, previously since 1989 dominated by a bipolar, largely two-party system, saw this break up in the aftermath of a political scandal in the middle of the decade which put MSZP in disarray. This was followed by a street politics and the impact of the growing global economic and financial crises. These played on nationalist fears and sentiment, and on a concern over the social decline of the Hungarian middle and lower classes, ultimately paving the way for the rise of the populist right. The author debates the failure of political liberalism and the rise of the right, concluding that Hungary is following Austria and Italy in this regard, and that the forthcoming period is likely to see a consolidation of the country's bipolar political culture.

Keywords: political parties, political process, coalition government, extreme right-wing, decline of social democracy

Introduction

The April election has caused a political earthquake in Hungary. Hungarian party democracy has been moved by tectonic shifts which will change the country. The 'Hungarian Civic Union' (FIDESZ), counting as right-wing conservative, or right-wing populist, returned fulminantly to the corridors of power and the neo-fascist 'Movement for a better Hungary' (Jobbik) made a striking entry.¹ The outcome of the election can be described as an uprising of a people defeated by modernisation, a revolt of the deeply-frustrated voters of the social democratic MSZP which, in their opinion, had already lost its attraction before the crisis. Viktor Orbán, elected Prime Minister for the second time on 28 May 2010, can advance his anticipated radical renewal of Hungary

1 By using the controversial characterisation 'fascism' or 'neo-fascism', I rely on the following definition, which is compatible with other political science definitions: By this is meant 'A political philosophy and movement that arose in Europe in the decades following World War II' and in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe after the decline of communism. 'Like earlier fascist movements, neo-fascism advocated extreme nationalism, opposed liberal individualism, attacked Marxist and other left-wing ideologies, indulged in racist and xenophobic scapegoating and promoted populist right-wing economic programmes. Unlike the fascists, however, neo-fascists placed more blame for their countries' problems on non-European immigrants than on leftists and Jews, displayed little interest in taking *lebensraum* (German: 'living space') through the military conquest of other states, and made concerted efforts to portray themselves as democratic and 'mainstream.'" <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/408862/neofascism> [last accessed: 23 June 2010].

with a comfortable two-thirds majority after having previously governed the country from 1998-2002.

In contrast to most of the previous governments, the new rulers do not have to consider junior coalition partners, as had MSZP, which dropped in this election to 20.9 per cent of the vote. Its tense coalition with the left-liberal SZDSZ perished because of the political and personal contradictions involved. The liberal formations which emerged in the 1990s have left the political scene. Consequently, the divided SZDSZ did not even stand for election in April while its right-wing, or national-liberal pendant, the MDF, failed to reach the five per cent threshold.

In order better to estimate the political situation after the April 2010 election, in the following section the results of the election will be analysed in the broader context of connected development tendencies which are, according to Dieter Segert (2008): an increasing tendency towards populist politics; the hegemony of the political right at the same time as a weakness of the left; and, hence, the diagonal polarisation of the Hungarian party system. Is central-eastern Europe, and Hungary in particular, turning out to be a 'trendsetter', rubbing off on other European democracies?

The decay of MSZP in the context of a polarised political culture

The Hungarian party system has, until now, been characterised by a distinctive polarisation. A right-wing conservative (and complementary neo-fascist) and a social liberal wing have faced each other almost intransigently since the late nineties (Schmidt-Schweizer, 2007). In this context, speaking of a polarised election campaign is still very appropriate.² This becomes clear not only in the repeated polarised labelling (patriotic–anti-patriotic; nationalist–nationally non-reliable; Hungarian–anti-Hungarian; and the expansive use of the discrediting phrase 'communist') in order to distinguish 'friend' and 'enemy'.

It was, and primarily still is, FIDESZ which has polarised the political culture of Hungary, even after 2006, via its obstructive politics in the form of a boycott of parliament and demonstrations in the streets. These 'cultural politics' had 'degenerated into a destructive battle of intransigent opponents,' from which one gets the impression that the 'existence of the political community itself,' i.e. the nation, would be questioned, as Segert (2008: 26) judges with reference to studies by Ehrke (2006) and Bayer (2007). Besides, it is true that the virtue of political compromise, i.e. a rational political communication between wings, has been possible only very rarely so far. Part of the political class, including leading figures from the left and the right, have appealed to

2 When right-wing extremist parties, like István Csurka's MIEP or Gábor Vona's Jobbik, are counted as one political wing together with FIDESZ and MDF, it is due to programmatic-ideological reasons. As a matter of fact, FIDESZ has not distinguished itself clearly from right-wing radicalism. A selective co-operation between FIDESZ and MIEP happened in the background in 2001, while the open co-operation offered by Csurka was denied by FIDESZ officials (Schmidt-Schweizer, 2007: 376ff.). Furthermore, in 2001/2002 there was even speculation about a FIDESZ-MIEP coalition which, however, did not materialise because of the electoral defeat. MIEP failed to pass the five per cent hurdle. Cf. for that purpose Mayer and Odehnal, 2010: 44.

pre-rational attitudes and prejudices, fears and longings in the people in order to conserve their own power.

A culture of resentment, especially against Jews, ‘gypsies’ and ‘communists’, has intensified. Populists and demagogues have it easy, the more so as they know how to tie in with the stereotypes from the past. The manifest intransigence of the political wings increased in 2000, when Viktor Orbán’s FIDESZ-MDF coalition lost support and an election defeat 2002 seemed possible.³ A second ‘media war’ against critical journalists, and purges in the state mass media, began. In parallel campaigns against real and so-called communist crimes alongside the existing notions, MSZP embittered the political atmosphere, while the crimes of the Hungarian fascists (‘Pfeilkreuzler’) were neglected in national museums like the new ‘House of Terror’. Viktor Orbán’s confidante, László Kövér, made statements ‘that marked the revival of official anti-Semitism,’ while Orbán himself gave interviews to extreme media outlets, like the *Sunday News* (Bernath *et al*, 2005: 93). The applause of MIEP and other right-wing and fascist groups or voters was guaranteed (Schmidt-Schweizer, 2007: 360-366).

This polarisation more or less tended to strengthen the ideological hegemony of right-nationalist-fascist settlement in Hungarian politics which was also supported by the first status law to encourage domestic Hungarians in Romania, Slovakia and Serbia. On the other hand, it was clarified by the electoral defeat of Viktor Orbán in 2002 that nationalism and other extremes could be channelled through an intact political opposition and a functional political culture. The latter was eroded during the first Orbán era. Instead of accepting the defeat, he appealed to protest demonstrations, talked of electoral fraud and phrased the sentence that ‘The nation cannot be in opposition’ – which was meant to imply that the good, ‘orthodox’, patriotic Hungary had been betrayed (Mayer and Odehnal, 2010: 33).

Both wings sought to outbid each other with campaign pledges: tax cuts; pensions increases; improvement of social charges; and double-digit pay increases for civil servants. The latter was realised right after MSZP won the parliamentary elections in 2006.⁴ What seems to be appropriate in terms of salary and social politics, and is appreciated by the electorate, does not necessarily have to be rational according to economic policy. As early as in 2006, the budget deficit had increased to 9.2 per cent of gross national product. Hence, Hungary had one of the EU’s largest budget deficits and had to delay further the desired introduction of the euro (Federal Foreign Office, 2009).

Foreign direct investment, tax revenues and growth rates in general diminished at the same time. Corruption scandals, power struggles inside the party and the resignation in the middle of the election period in 2004 of Péter Medgyessy, the luckless apostrophised ‘red banker’, all contributed to undermine the credibility of the socialists. Medgyessy’s successor, the multi-millionaire businessman, Ferenc Gyurcsány, did not

3 This was also caused by controversial decisions over the economy, and poverty and social policy.

4 In 2006, one could still talk about a ‘dominant two-party system’ as a perspective on the results of the parliamentary elections show (Kiszelly, 2008: 129).

backtrack until after the elections. His fatal 'lie speech' to MSZP officials, which emerged even though it was not meant for publication, started out from the sentence:

No country in Europe has screwed up as much as we have. We have obviously lied throughout the past 18 to 24 months. (Cited according to Mayer and Odehnal, 2010: 47)

Furthermore, no-one would be able to mention any significant government measure helping to reconstruct the country's economy of which they could be proud. The process of erosion of the government accelerated when parts of Gyurcsány's speech emerged in the media in September 2006: an opportunistic and uninspired government had only been ready to reveal the seriousness of the situation to the party and voters after the elections.

Mass demonstrations and riots by angry FIDESZ and Jobbik supporters, rampaging skinheads and members of the illegal 'Hungarian Guard' organisation, beleaguered parliament for weeks, while hard police operations, injuries and court cases brought the country into a crisis of political legitimacy. At the end of the crisis, Gyurcsány drew the consequences and, in March 2009, resigned from his offices as Prime Minister and party leader. His successor, the crossbench economics minister Gordon (György) Bajnai, established a government tolerated by the socialists but consisting largely of impartial but business-friendly 'experts'. According to the constitution, Gyurcsány had to be deselected by a constructive vote of no confidence by the left coalition in power before Bajnai could take office.

Aside of this political disaster, the economic and financial crises led to further turbulences and the impoverishment of a large part of the population which neither the old nor the new government could get under control. In 2007 alone, real wages and earnings decreased by five per cent (with an average salary of about €400), while unemployment increased to about ten per cent and inflation to seven per cent (Eickhoff, 2008: 26; FAZ, 9 June 2010). Only a few years earlier, unemployment amounted to five per cent; and, in Budapest and the prospering west of the country, there even existed a labour shortage. The economically under-developed, de-industrialised east remained in stagnation and resignation (cf. Becker, 2007: 331 *et seq.*).

Hit severely by the crisis, Hungary was, and remains, dependent on emergency credits from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank⁵ up to a figure of about \$20bn in 2008. The austerity policy enforced by Bajnai, budget reductions of €1.62bn, tax increases, wage reductions, etc. paralysed MSZP. The transformation failure of the social-liberal coalition, unparalleled so far, armed the election campaign of a self-confident political opponent. The modest consolidation success of the 'government of the experts' went largely unnoticed by the Hungarian public.⁶ Before this

5 Cf. for that purpose: 'Bajnai soll neuer Regierungschef werden' *Spiegel-Online* 30 March 2009 www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,616212.00.html [last accessed 1 June 10].

6 According to the analysis of the German Federal Foreign Office (2009), the social-liberal government coalition in 2006 had already 'directed a rigid budgetary policy, including increasing duties and taxes, the abolition of subsidies (energy, drugs, local public transport) and the reduction of staff capacity in public administration. Thereby the budget deficit could be diminished

constellation, a landslide for FIDESZ could no longer be obstructed; hoping for the 'crisis management' of the Bajnai government turned out to be illusionary and one could talk only of damage limitation. A defensive election campaign slogan followed on from this: 'Guardian of Democracy' vs. FIDESZ's 'Single-Party Rule' (Hutmacher, 2010: 4). In spite of the authoritarian tendencies during the first Orbán era (1998-2002), these tactics were no longer effective. The electorate called for fundamental political change: it voted right-wing conservative, not to say neo-fascist.

The April elections, the comeback of FIDESZ and the formation of a hegemonic-antagonistic right-wing

The Hungarian voting system is based on a combination of a majority vote system and proportional representation. Seats are distributed according to party lists and to directly elected candidates, as in Germany, while each voter has two votes, which can be used independently. However, the electoral law is more complicated. Some 176 of the approximately 386 mandates available in the parliament are allocated according to the majority vote system in so called single-seat constituencies; up to 152 mandates are elected by proportional representation in multi-seat constituencies; and the remaining 58 mandates represent compensation seats.

If a direct candidate does not obtain an absolute majority in a constituency, a run-off will be held in this constituency two weeks later. The literature emphasises that the complicated voting system ensures a bigger degree of proportionality but, all-in-all, it effectively favours the two large formations, FIDESZ and MSZP, which usually obtain five to ten per cent more seats than their second vote proportion (Körösény, Fodor and Dieringer, 2010: 381-383).

After 1998, both major parties have been proportionally quite similar in size and dependent on a coalition partner. This situation has been intensified since 2002. Against this background, the election victory of FIDESZ in 2010 represents a break unparalleled in Hungarian post-war history so far. The European elections in 2009 had seen a writing on the wall regarding the future crash of the left, with FIDESZ obtaining 56.4 per cent of the votes against MSZP's 17.4 per cent. The elections of 2010 on 11 and 25 April made this definitively clear.

from 9.3 per cent to 4.9 per cent (2007) and to 4.3 per cent (2008). In 2009, it wants it to reach 3.9 per cent. This must be assessed as a great success given the decrease in GDP of 6.7 per cent. '.

A comparative view of the results reveals the significant decline of the MSZP:

Table 1 – Results of the parliamentary elections in 2002, 2006 and 2010

	2002	2006	2010
MSZP	42.0 %	43.2 %	20.9 %
FIDESZ	41.1 %	42.0 %	52.9 %
SZDSZ	5.6 %	6.5 %	-
MDF	*	5.0 %	2.2 %
Jobbik		2.2 %	15.9 %
LMP	-	-	6.8 %
Turnout	71.5 %	68.0 %	64.0 %

* In 2002, FIDESZ and MDF campaigned together on a single list

Sources: Hutmacher, 2010: 1 et seq; and Körösiény, Fodor and Dieringer, 2010: 385-386.

The share of the vote of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), the successor to the communist Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, dropped by 22.3 percentage points compared to the national elections in 2006. Hence, two out of three voters have turned their backs on the former government party which ruled Hungary from 2002 to 2010 and from 1994 until 1998.

FIDESZ not only won 98 per cent of all direct mandates, it also reached a two-thirds majority in parliament and is able to run the country with 262 out of the 378 seats. In the long-run, there is the risk of Jobbik establishing itself as a right-wing extremist party, obtaining protest votes at the expense of FIDESZ in future elections.

However, what worked in electoral terms for Jobbik *vis-à-vis* the left-wing MSZP may not necessarily succeed within the newly-established right-wing hegemony.

The result of LMP ('Lehet Más a Politika!' – 'Politics Can Be Different!') deserves closer attention: this is a new formation from the eco-libertarian spectrum which managed to obtain 6.8 per cent in its first ever election. It will become apparent in the course of the new election period whether it will be able to refill the vacuum caused by the failure of political liberalism.

My assumption of the formation of a hegemonic-antagonistic 'right'-wing can be proven by the affinities of both formations concerning right-wing extremist, nationalist ideological touchstones and support for a state-authoritarian approach to problem-solving. For instance, 4 June is, in the future, going to be celebrated as a day of National Unity: against the background of Hungary losing two-thirds of its territory and parts of the Hungarian population being obliged to live in neighbouring countries when the Treaty of Trianon was signed on 4 June 1920, this seems to be a purposeful and revisionist provocation towards the outside world and a possible signal towards a revision of the contentious agreement.

Another example is that, shortly after the election, Orbán presented his law and order campaign in the north-east Hungarian city of Ozd concerned by poverty and poverty delinquency:

The abidance of law is our duty and finally we are providing more money for it.

The Prime Minister designate advocated life sentences even for petty thief recidivists, with significant impact in a city having one of the largest Roma populations. Gábor Vona, sorcerer's apprentice from the MIEP orbit, one of the founders and chair of Jobbik, in 2002, and the 'Hungarian Guard', in 2006, could not have expressed this in a better way.

Meanwhile, Orbán is non-committal regarding the effective prohibition of the right-wing extremist paramilitary 'Hungarian Guard' organisation, composed of members of Jobbik associating with the models of the fascist Horthy dictatorship. On the contrary, the government does not see any cause for proceeding against it as long as Jobbik and the Guard – the memberships partly overlap – hold on to their official strategy of not supporting anti-state propaganda and not invoking violence. Finally, Orbán and the politicians and publicists close to him have encouraged fascist-like media such as *Sajtóklub* (in English: Press Club) or the weekly newspaper *Hungarian Democrat*, in which not only an anti-Semitic, gypsy-hostile agitation was being practised but which also called to mind the foundation of a movement of 'citizen circles' e.g. the 'national self-defence' movement in which Gábor Vona and other right-wing extremist ideologues cavorted in 2006 and subsequently (Mayer and Odehnal, 2010: 33-37). In willingly doing so, they tied in with pre-communist and communist constancies of racism and exclusion, as well as with existing sub-cultural diffusion processes (music, clothes, etc.) (Szabó, 2009: 19). According to observers, it becomes:

More and more clear that the right-wing extremist scene, which had become socially acceptable thanks to the FIDESZ representatives during the demonstrations against the government in 2006, cannot be stopped even through the latest events on behalf of FIDESZ. (...) For instance, on 15b March 2008, a doll in the shape of Gyurcsány was dressed with a Jewish *kippah* and symbolically hanged. (Eickhoff, 2008: 27)

The partly unexplained murders of and assaults against members of the Roma minority in 2009 were not really condemned within these circles.

Consequentially, Jobbik can be characterised as a 'radical branch of FIDESZ' (Szabó, 2009: 19), having received the impulse for mobilisation through electoral defeat lasting from 2002 until 2010, and which continues to be popular because of the fear of social decline amongst the Hungarian middle and lower classes.

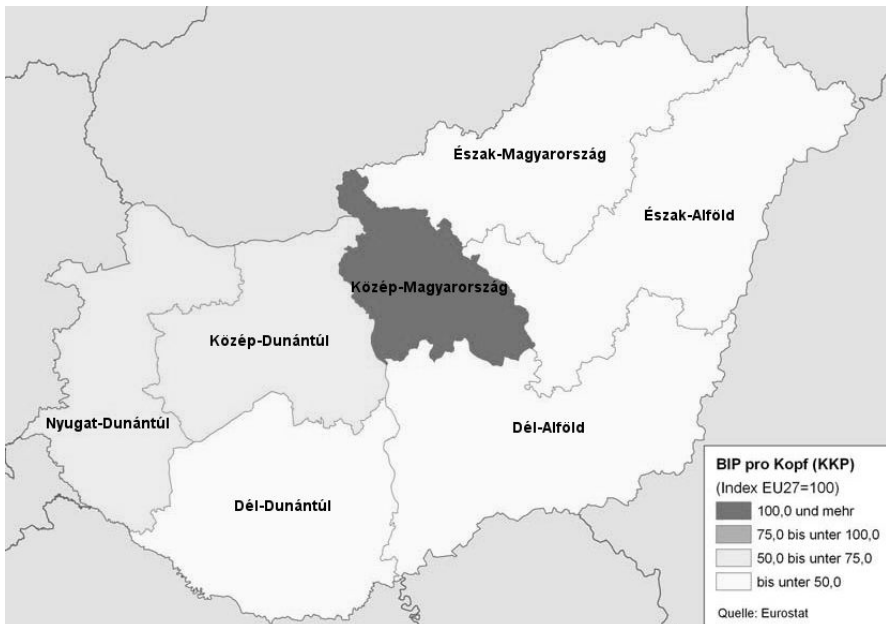
Against such a background, the landslide victory of FIDESZ cannot simply be reduced to the charisma, or oft-stated demagoguery, of Viktor Orbán (Mayer and Odehnal, 2010: 33ff; Konrad, 2010: 17), nor to the oft-articulated anger with Bajnai's minority government supported by the socialists and the broken campaign pledges during the 'lie speech' of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. Rather, it has to be linked to the rise of Jobbik.

Jobbik and MSZP – Results from the regions

Jobbik’s potential voters are, without any doubt, heterogeneous. Many of its officers are academics or operating successfully in business life. Many students may be found at the social base of the ‘Hungarian Guard’ and, hence, of Jobbik too. In what follows in this section, it becomes clear that the losers in the modernisation and transformation process are visible in geographical terms; in particular, such groups had formed the previous social basis of MSZP but changed their political affiliation in this election.

The accompanying figure, taken from a German language version of a Eurostat publication, provides a broad overview of the GDP per capita of the population, making visible the economic strength of the regions and counties. In the capital region Közép-Magyarország [Central Hungary], GDP per capita amounts to 101.6 per cent of the EU-27 average and, hence, is comparable with the rest of Europe. In regions like Észak-Magyarország [Northern Hungary] and Észak-Alföld [Northern Great Plain], on the other hand, gross regional product reaches scarcely more than 40 % of the European average. Economically strong regions, such as Közép-Magyarország, Nyugat-Dunántúl [Western Transdanubia] and Közép-Dunántúl [Central Transdanubia], with unemployment rates of 5-6 per cent, demonstrate intense support for FIDESZ. In contrast, unemployment rates in the east and south amount to 8-10 per cent, according to official information.

The level of regional development is also characterised by major differences in earnings. In the central region around Budapest, for example, average salaries are 22 % higher than the national average, whereas in the east they amount to just 83 % of the national average.



There are clear examples demonstrating a correlation between Jobbik's election results and particular socio-economic indicators (low GDP, low employment rates and a high proportion of poverty: this correlation means gains for Jobbik at the expense of the reformed socialists). Furthermore, a positive correlation can be identified between high Jobbik results and a distinctive proportion of the population being Roma. In one constituency, Edeleny in north-east Hungary, where Jobbik was able to reach thirty per cent of the votes, the Roma proportion is one of the highest in the country. This constituency is interesting given that the original FIDESZ parliamentary candidate had resigned on the grounds of making radical anti-Roma statements: regardless, the Jobbik candidate won comfortably, while MSZP obtained just eight per cent of the votes.

In order to highlight the correlation assumption, the election results from three counties in economically weak regions are going to be drawn upon. Észak-Magyarország [Northern Hungary] and Észak-Alföld [Northern Great Plain] both have GDPs per capita of less than 50 per cent of the European average.

In Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county (proportion of Roma: 14 per cent), part of the Észak-Magyarország region, Jobbik obtained the best average result countrywide:

Jobbik: 27.20 %	(2006: MIEP/Jobbik 2.30 % – plus 24.90 %)
MSZP: 18.90 %	(2006: 50.94 % – minus 32.04 %)
FIDESZ: 45.87 %	(2006: 38.18 % – plus 7.69 %)

In the county of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg (proportion of Roma: 13 per cent), Jobbik had its fourth best result:

Jobbik: 23.64 %	(2006: MIEP/Jobbik 1.65 % – plus 21.99 %)
MSZP: 14.84 %	(2006: 45.47 % – minus 30.63 %)
FIDESZ: 53.84 %	(2006: 44.45 % – plus 9.39 %)

Last but not least, the example of Nógrád (proportion of Roma: 7 per cent), where Jobbik had its fifth best performance, clarifies that a smaller Roma proportion can relativise the difference between MSZP and Jobbik.

Jobbik: 20.82 %	(2006: MIEP/Jobbik 2.16 % – plus 18.66 %)
MSZP: 20.39 %	(2006: 44.41 % – minus 24.02 %)
FIDESZ: 51.84 %	(2006: 41.06 % – plus 10.78 %)

Compared to the national average, FIDESZ stayed below the gains made in the prospering regions in these strongholds of workers and the unemployed. All in all, Jobbik was able to exploit the bad results of MSZP. FIDESZ made distinctive gains in these counties, too, but it felt the consequences of right-wing extremist competition.

It becomes clear that Jobbik obtained better results than MSZP in all three counties; i.e. socialist voters have changed their party political affiliation, for a number of different reasons (unemployment, discontent with the socialist party, xenophobia and criminality). The assumption that the losers in modernisation and in the crisis have swapped political wings can hence be substantiated. Xenophobic resentment, fed with ghetto formations and ghetto criminality, is stoked by politicians mostly originating from the regions' middle and upper classes. That they have infected an insecure population is quite explosive and augments worries about the future. Together with Austria

and Italy, Hungary is another trendsetter of a right-wing populism which has fascist-like references.

Nevertheless, the failure of the social-liberal coalition's economic and social policy, and the alienation of MSZP from parts of its social base, are obvious, too.

The majority of Hungarians is frustrated, paralysed and afraid of social descent. Forms of rudeness are spreading in everyday life. The political language has gone to ruin, the political elites are corrupt and without any vision. Jobbik's advances conquer a time-worn, uninspired political discourse. (Mayer and Odehnal, 2010: 41)

The hegemony of the political right and the formation of its antagonistic bloc are based upon this vacuum. The Bajnai government's anti-crisis strategy tending towards the neo-liberal led to a political backwater. It is going to be interesting to see which political, economic and financial sacrifices the winning FIDESZ is going to ask of the population. However, thus far it is only certain that there will not be any massive cut-backs in pensions.

Conclusion

In the face of the new dynamics of power, according to many observers, politically motivated 'cultural struggles' are becoming apparent – for instance, in the universities and the media, but also in corresponding criminal proceedings against members of the socialists and the liberals exiting the government. Furthermore, an increase in 'anti-gypsy hysteria', as well as a law and order-based campaign, anticipate a consolidation in the polarisation of the political culture which has existed hitherto.⁷ Moreover, Viktor Orbán continues to play the national card with the new citizenship act entitling members of Hungarian minorities, e.g. in Slovakia, Romania and Serbia, to a Hungarian passport even though they cannot demonstrate permanent residence in Hungary. Irritations with the neighbours are pre-programmed, as shown by the vehement reactions from the Slovakian government which is itself gladly playing the national card.

Soon, Hungary will take on the Presidency of the European Council. By then at the latest, FIDESZ is going to have to practise political realism or else it is going to be internationally proscribed. If the Orbán government is going to return to a moderate centre-right politics and introduce an austerity policy suiting the EU, on the one hand frustration over the elections will increase and, on the other, so will the popularity of Jobbik. The dangerous neo-fascist genie in question is not so easily forced back into the bottle.

The Socialists are not very dangerous to the new government; the neo-fascists, in contrast, are: a lot of youthful energy is demonstrating its power. Now they are the younger siblings. What FIDESZ had offered the old, now they get from Jobbik in return. This time, too, the ironic truth

7 Cf. for that purpose Pierre Kende who assumes, according to *Tagesspiegel* (15 May 2010), that, given the wide ranging power of FIDESZ, the Orbán government would try to synchronise the country both 'culturally and morally'.

seems to remain valid whereby political radicalism is a boomerang, hitting the head of the thrower when it is being thrown at an adversary. (György Konrád, 2010: 17)

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