

October 8, 2012

Lost in Translation: the Janus Face of Hungarian Populism

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Viktor Orbán, the powerful Prime Minister of Hungary, has been making every effort at home to build an image as an European troublemaker. Angry at the EU's criticism of his constitutional and financial reforms, he has lost no opportunity to attack the EU for interfering in the country's domestic affairs. By comparing Brussels to the USSR Moscow or accusing it of colonizing Hungary, he not only constantly makes the EU leaders dizzy but also strengthens the country's reputation for knee-jerk Europhobia.

But it is hard to reconcile Orbán's domestic rhetoric with his European policy. When it comes to taking action in Brussels, Orbán always goes with the flow. Did Hungary ignore any of the EU's amendments to the Hungarian new media law or constitution? No, Budapest immediately accepted all of them. Did Orbán question any of the EU proposals for economic governance? Only once, when – along with four other countries – he rejected the Euro Plus Pact, but even this did not prevent him from bringing Hungary into the EU fiscal pact, a move unimaginable for Václav Klaus' Czech Republic.

The comparison is apposite, because – unlike the Czech Civic Democratic Party or indeed the British Conservatives – Fidesz in the European Parliament is a member of the European People's Party, which may serve as a synonym for the European mainstream. It was, after all Joseph Daul, the chairman of the EPP Group, who always backed Orbán and did not hesitate to publicly call him a "great European". Daul uttered these words just before Hungary's Presidency of the EU Council in 2011, which turned out to be one of the most successful in the post-Lisbon era. And now Orbán, who used to informally put forward the proposal of setting up the a common Visegrad bank, does not say «no» to the controversial idea of the EU banking union.

This seems surprising for a politician usually described as "radical" or "Eurosceptic". Many erroneously tend to identify Fidesz, Orbán's currently ruling party, and its leader with the fascist right, forgetting that the Hungarian political scene has always been characterized by exaggeration with roots in the interwar period. Conservative Fidesz in most European countries would probably be a modern Christian-democratic party, similar to its yokefellows from the European Parliament: the German CDU or Polish Civic Platform. In Hungary, however, centre-right means it maintains its links with a mild nationalism.

And going further: Jobbik, a radical main opposition party, with its anti-Semitic, anti-Roma, anti-immigrant and pro-Iran rhetoric, support for the death penalty, open irredentism and neo-Nazi paramilitary Magyar Gárda, seems to double what one could expect from the typical far-right movement. In the European views, Jobbik, unlike Orbán, does not limit itself to harsh words. Its leaders burn union flags at a demonstration and openly urge the country to quit the EU, against which they plan to arm the nation. In fact, in terms of both extremism and anti-Europeism, it would be difficult in the whole EU to find any Jobbik's counterpart.

The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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The deadly rivalry in the right between Fidesz and Jobbik is the driving force for Orbán's harsh language in his home-country. Both parties fight for a similar electorate. Moreover, during the last two years Fidesz has hastily entered the Jobbik's yard by implementing many of its proposals, such as high bank taxing or voting rights for the Hungary's citizens living abroad. But Orbán's double talk has nothing to do with Klaus' authentic and truthful Euroscepticism. The Hungarian PM is rather pragmatically seeking to kill two birds with one stone: he wants to keep right-wing voters on his side and at the same time stay as close to the EU mainstream as possible.

The Janus-Faced Strategy is, though, quite risky. When the centre-right politician takes over radical slogans, he legitimises extreme behaviours and sends a signal that they fit into the mainstream. The lesson is to be learned from France. During the 2011 presidential campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy started to speak the language of the nationalist National Front. How did it end? Sarkozy shamefully lost and the NF leader, Marine Le Pen, got the best result ever for the French extreme right. This may be the case for Fidesz, which since 2010 has lost more than half of its supporters.

Although among the Hungarian elite there is a strong conviction that the 15% threshold is the maximum that Jobbik can achieve, they tend to forget that the next two years left until the elections may be one of the most challenging for the EU in its history. And the more the EU crisis deepens, the stronger the radicals become. Orbán then one day will face a dilemma about which mask to wear. The first is to continue the destructive race with Jobbik, becoming eventually more radical than the radicals. The second – much tougher – is to follow the Daul's *bon mot*, which does not necessarily mean a sudden transformation into an eager Euro-optimist, but rather an expectation that Orbán would limit harsh rhetoric and take more responsibility for the EU's future.

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Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

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Via Clerici, 5
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