



PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 49 (989), 19 May 2017 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski ● Bartosz Wiśniewski ● Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka ● Anna Maria Dynier ● Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk
Sebastian Płóciennik ● Patrycja Sasnal ● Justyna Szczudlik ● Marcin Terlikowski ● Tomasz Żornaczuk

Despite Protests, Fidesz Positioned Well a Year Out from Hungary's Parliamentary Elections

Veronika Jóźwiak

Massive anti-government protests in Budapest in April this year have not changed the distribution of support among Hungary's political parties. Although Hungarians increasingly favour change, the party with the greatest chance of winning the parliamentary elections in April 2018 is still Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz. The reasons include both the inability of the opposition parties to take advantage of the public's discontent, seen in their low backing, and an electoral system that perpetuates the greatest political force.

The Course and Significance of the Protests. At the beginning of April, the parliament adopted amendments to Hungary's Higher Education Law that make it impossible for the Central European University (CEU), founded by Hungarian-American investor George Soros, to operate in Budapest under the current rules. This triggered several mass street demonstrations in the capital involving as many as 80,000 participants, mostly students and young people between 20 and 35 years old and educated middle-class people. This group until now had been considered apolitical. The last demonstrations of this scale took place in Budapest in October 2014 against the planned introduction of an internet tax. Then, it was also the government's actions directly interfering with Hungarians' daily lives that led them to the streets. For these groups, a sense of belonging to the developed Western states and access to opportunities such as education, work, services and information, is greatly important. The EU flag became the symbol of the protests while chanted slogans demanded the government make the clear choice of the European Union over Russia.

The recent success of the movement named Momentum has also signalled an increase in political activity among Hungarians. Momentum was founded by young people who had not dealt with politics before and recently was transformed into a party. On another issue, Hungary's candidacy for the Olympic Games in 2024, to be held in Budapest, the party showed its effectiveness by gathering 260,000 signatures—twice as many as needed to call a referendum in the capital—in a short time against holding the Games, mainly because of the fear of excess costs. That led the government to withdraw from the process.

According to most polls, however, since the end of April the protests have not significantly changed the support for the various parties. Among all eligible voters, support for the coalition government of Fidesz-Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) is 33%, for extreme right-wing party Jobbik, 11%, for the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), 10%, for the leftist party of former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, Democratic Coalition (DK), 5%, for the Greens (LMP), 3%, for Momentum, 2%, and for others, including the centrist Együtt (Together) party, the Liberals, and the satirical Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party, 1% each. KDNP, Fidesz's coalition partner, carries no significant political weight—in the current government, it has a deputy prime minister but no ministers. However, to maintain an overt image as a Christian party, Fidesz will again run for parliament allied with KDNP and will continue to govern with it in a coalition in case of

victory. The percentage of undecided voters is quite high at 36%, of which only about 10% plan to vote in the elections. This means that the parties can mainly count on voters with established political preferences.

Fidesz's Electoral Strategy. With voter support high and stable for more than half a year, the ruling party has proven its political strategy effective. Fidesz's main goal less than a year before the elections is to maintain its core electorate of about 2 million voters, which is enough to win. To mobilise these voters, Fidesz has created an "enemy" that it portrays as a constant threat to Hungary and which includes international financiers (such as Soros), "Brussels", and immigrants. The law directed at CEU—a symbol of Western liberalism—was one instrument it has used to achieve its goal. Another planned law aimed at NGOs has the same function. Based rather closely on a Russian law, the Hungarian law would regulate the activities of NGOs that receive foreign funding exceeding 7.2 million HUF (about €22,000), which the government describes as representing foreign interests. Another tool it uses are "national consultations", such as one titled "Let's stop Brussels", in the form of questionnaires sent to citizens and containing anti-EU and anti-immigrant elements. This and other propaganda directed against the EU, and Soros in particular, among public and pro-government media has reached an unprecedented scale in Hungary.

Although Fidesz has been leading the polls since 2010, it is exacerbating the public discourse. On one hand, the strong message contained in the actions is based on antisemitism—again, the example of Soros, who is Jewish—and xenophobia. On the other hand, it refers to the Hungarian tradition of political rhetoric based on complaint and grievance against unjust treatment experienced by the political community. The sense of uncertainty about its electoral victory explains the governing party's "hijacking" of the ideologies and policies of the extreme right (prejudice against foreigners, antisemitism) and the left (statism, manipulation of utility fees). Fidesz has used these levers to successfully erect a wide electoral camp. Another characteristic of the ruling party is its speed in attempting to destroy any new rivals that appear on the political scene, such as Momentum, mainly by raising fears among the public of a of moral and ideological liberalism.

Hungary's elections law, which was adopted in 2011, favours Fidesz because it rewards the biggest political power over others. The system increased the importance of single-seat constituencies (106 out of 199 seats) because the winning candidate's party receives additional votes for the party list (93 seats). This is a disproportionate system in which only about 40% of votes cast will guarantee a parliamentary majority of 2/3 of the seats, hampering small parties.

The Oppositions' Strategy. Although participants in the recent protests clearly do not support any of the existing political forces, the manifestations have created a chance for the Hungarian centre-left to strengthen its base. All such parties, in line with the slogans chanted at the demonstrations, are trying to convince voters that the real stake in the 2018 elections will be whether Hungary will be part of the West or bound to Russia. So far, however, they have not been able to persuade voters. The reason is primarily dispersion: internal conflicts have divided the left and it is not clear to voters what the small parties represent. These parties' willingness to collaborate has been low since the defeat of a left-wing coalition in the 2014 elections. Moreover, the political left has lost its wide backing among the younger generation, which has formed a political base mainly to the right, including around Jobbik. In addition, the Hungarian media market (both public and private) is predominantly pro-government, which further complicates the situation of the Hungarian opposition.

At the same time, an intense anti-government campaign by the right-wing opposition, namely Jobbik, highlighting corruption scandals surrounding Fidesz, has not had the expected effect. The party last year adopted a consolidation strategy after the government had taken over the ideological space of the extreme right with its radical actions during the mass-migration crisis. Jobbik now describes itself as a conservative, nationalist-Christian party, hoping to attract some Fidesz supporters.

Conclusions and Prospects. The political activity among Hungarians, so far apathetic, has increased recently. The protests will not, however, directly translate into a change in the distribution of support for the political forces. In the current electoral system, only one party or a coalition will be able to win against Fidesz, especially if it takes advantage of the growing anti-government sentiment in the country and attracts voters away from the ruling party. However, they do not exist yet on the Hungarian political scene.

Further intensification of the political debate can be expected in Hungary in the year before the election, with the government likely to take more action that might be classified as standing in conflict with EU law. Hungary's actions have already resulted in a European Parliament resolution of 17 May calling on the EP to prepare to trigger Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, which could result in sanctions on the country. The government, though, clearly considers the costs of the country's weakened position in the EU and in the international arena do not outweigh the benefits to Fidesz in the upcoming campaign. Proof of that is found in the government's insistence on passing the anti-CEU law despite the "lex CEU" protests and sharp reactions from the European People's Party, the U.S. government, and even prominent supporters of Fidesz.