



## Hungary Ahead of Parliamentary Elections

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*Hungarian ruling party Fidesz has sharpened its rhetoric against immigrants at the end of the campaign before the parliamentary elections scheduled for 8 April. The campaign has included elements of criticism towards the UN and a package of draft laws limiting the activities of non-governmental organisations. It is unlikely the government will soften its rhetoric and actions after the elections. This may negatively affect Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's ability to build alliances among the European Christian Democrat parties in the future.*

**Sharpening of the Political Discourse.** Fidesz does not have an election programme. It has built up its campaign around migration issues, which have been used for three years, since migrants, some from the Middle East, reached the southern borders of Hungary. It has used this issue instrumentally to maintain voter support. In the government's rhetorical fight against accepting migrants, the enemy was initially EU institutions ("Brussels"), then the American philanthropist of Hungarian descent George Soros. At the end of the campaign, the UN has also begun to fill the function of enemy for internal political interests. According to the Hungarian government, the UN intends to impose on the country an obligation to take in illegal immigrants. Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó called on UN High Commissioner for Refugees Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein to resign after he described Prime Minister Orbán's statements as racist and xenophobic. At the same time, Hungary is critical of the Global Compact for Migration, prepared under the auspices of the United Nations.

Fidesz argues that at stake in the next parliamentary elections is setting up another "national" government or one "supporting migration." To illustrate the threats posed by migrants to the Hungarian nation, Orbán, in his speech of 8 February, pointed to the need for Hungarians to keep their own "colour" and avoid a "mixed" nation, which analysts suggested the government aims at maintaining the country's racial purity. In turn, in a speech on 18 February, Orbán claimed that Hungarians are better educated and more employable than migrants.

The prime minister uses other offensive rhetoric against employees of NGOs, calling them "well-developed examples" of "the type of European ideological intellectuals." At the same time, the government submitted to parliament a draft package of laws under the name "Stop Soros," aimed at further limiting the activities of NGOs. The new regulations will, among others, enable the interior minister to suspend an NGO the government deems "supporting illegal migration," which it considers a national security risk. The law would also impose a 25% tax on donations these entities receive from abroad. The vote on the bill was postponed until after the elections.

**Opposition Campaign.** The opposition focuses in its campaign on calling the government to settle well-documented corruption scandals related to the prime minister's family and the problem of the mass emigration of young Hungarians. Also, all the opposition parties have made numerous economic promises; however, none has presented a broader vision of the country's future or its place in the EU and in the world. The parties do not express themselves clearly about the relocation of refugees. They declare, however, that they would not remove the fence on the southern border of the country.

The opposition is more active than in the previous elections in seeking the votes of Hungarians living in neighbouring countries. The ethnic policy of the Fidesz government has increased the number of Hungarian citizens by more than 1 million since 2010. About 360,000 voters who do not have an address in Hungary have already registered on electoral rolls. This is about twice as many as before the elections in 2014 and are mostly voters from neighbouring countries, whose votes may decide two seats in the 199-member parliament. In 2014, these mandates gave the ruling party a constitutional majority. That is why the leaders of Jobbik, the Hungarian Socialist Party, and the party Dialog (MSZP-P) paid a visit to Transylvania in Romania, even though in the last elections an overwhelming majority (95%) of Hungarians living there voted for Fidesz. As the electoral rights of Hungarian citizens living abroad are subject to public debate in Hungary (only 18% of the country considers them justified), these parties ensured their support for maintaining these rights. Jobbik has also promised to support efforts to create an autonomous Szeklerland in Transylvania, inhabited mainly by Hungarians. At the same time, the party of former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, the Democratic Coalition (DK), highlights in its campaign the potential withdrawal of electoral rights of citizens who do not reside in Hungary.

**Support for the Parties.** Polls from the beginning of March indicate that a coalition government of Fidesz-Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) will gain another mandate to form a government. Among all eligible voters, support for Fidesz-KDNP is 39%, for extreme right-wing party Jobbik, it is 12%, for MSZP-P, starting from the joint electoral list, headed by the most popular politician of the opposition Gergely Karácsony, 9%, for the leftist DK, 6%, and for the Greens (LMP), 4%. The electoral threshold is 5% for individual parties, and 10% for two parties sharing a common list. Therefore, apart from Fidesz and Jobbik, none of the political forces can be certain of achieving the electoral threshold. If all of them enter parliament, the opposition would have more seats than in the 2014 elections.

**Fidesz By-election Loss and Opposition Chances.** In the local government by-election held on 25 February in Hódmezővásárhely, one of the few Hungarian cities where Fidesz has been ruling for over two decades, Péter Márki-Zay, an independent candidate, won with a clear advantage. He had the support of all opposition parties. The vote proved that when there is high turnout (62.5%), maintaining the ruling party's core electorate may not be enough to win, since Fidesz received only a slightly smaller number of votes in this election than could have been expected from public opinion polls.

Such a scenario will be difficult to repeat in the parliamentary elections. First, as some Hungarian analysts note, Márki-Zay won not because of the opposition alliance but rather their withdrawal, marking him as a credible candidate among local voters. Second, there is no joint opposition candidate in most of the 106 single-mandate constituencies in the parliamentary elections. The opposition's fight for mandates—and public funding—prevailed over the attempt to unite. Third, none of the current opposition parties played a role in the last parliamentary term for Fidesz's main rival, and this alone creates the chance for the opposition to win when considering the specifics of the Hungarian electoral system.<sup>1</sup>

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** The probability of a Fidesz victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections and the possibility of setting up a government for the third time in a row is very high. The rhetoric of the ruling party used in the electoral campaign makes it similar to European extreme-right forces. It is not probable that Fidesz will soften its internal policy style after the elections, since it serves to justify to voters the government's actions. As a consequence, its support within the European People's Party may narrow, which may lead to seeking allies among the more radical European right-wing forces. Orbán's meeting with Giorgia Meloni, president of the Italian Eurosceptic party Brothers of Italy, on 28 February in Budapest and another unofficial meeting with Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch extreme right-wing Party of Freedom, on 25 January can be considered the first signs of that. Wilders presented the Hungarian edition of his book in the city of Győr in the presence of government representatives.

Compliance with the judgments of the Court of Justice of the European Union in legal disputes and the lack of conflict with large EU states confirm that Hungary conducts a European and foreign policy independent from the internal political discourse. It considers democratic values to be a purely formal legal question and it is convinced that such an approach helps it to avoid the negative consequences of their domestic political actions in EU forums. However, some of Orbán's speeches, perceived as racist, as well as limiting civil society's functioning, are noticed in Europe, confirmed by critical remarks by the Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality Věra Jourová, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights Nils Muižnieks, and the head of diplomacy of Luxembourg Jean Asselborn. This may damage the effectiveness of Hungary's pragmatic foreign policy, if compliance with the rule of law, including the provisions of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, become decisive in the discussion on the future of the EU and its budget. Linking these issues has been announced, among others, by German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

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<sup>1</sup> V. Józwiak, "Despite Protests, Fidesz Positioned Well a Year Out from Hungary's Parliamentary Elections," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 49 (989), 19 May 2017.