

2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 8 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN HUNGARY JUNE 13 2004

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Key points:

- 24 Hungarian MEPs were elected under a proportional electoral system.
- At 38.5%, turnout was lower than expected.
- No significant new political force emerged; only the four political parties represented in Parliament succeeded in electing candidates.
- Hard Eurosceptic parties received only approximately 3% of the vote.
- The main opposition party, Fidesz, gained the largest share of the vote (47.4%), collecting 13% more than the governing Socialists.
- Both small parliamentary parties, the junior coalition partner Alliance of Free Democrats and the Hungarian Democratic Forum in opposition, fared well (or better than expected).
- The campaign was dominated by domestic political issues, while discussion of EU policy/European integration was negligible.
- The results primarily reflect the government's mid-term unpopularity.

Background

The first European parliamentary election in Hungary was held on the basis of Act CXIII, adopted in December 2003. The law established a proportional electoral system, with a 5% threshold and mandates distributed according to the d'Hondt formula in Hungary as a single electoral district. With a population of over 10 million, Hungary was to send 24 MEPs to the European Parliament (EP). The parties that succeeded in collecting the required 20,000 recommendations from registered voters contested the election with fixed lists of candidates. The system was sufficiently similar to the PR tier of national elections (used since 1990) to be familiar to voters.¹

¹ Approximately half of the mandates for Parliament are distributed to party lists in a PR system, while the remaining seats are contested in single member constituencies.

Four of the eight parties presenting lists in the European election are represented in Parliament in the current legislative term (2002-6): the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats in government, and Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz-MPSZ) and the small Christian-democratic Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in opposition. Since the mid-1990s, Hungarian political life has been dominated by the confrontation of the two major parties, the Hungarian Socialist Party (the social democratised successor of the pre-1989 state-party) and Fidesz (a right-wing catch-all party), with the two together generally receiving over 80% of votes in national elections. The Free Democrats and the Democratic Forum, the dominant forces of the democratic transition and the early 1990s, had gradually become allies and default junior coalition partners for the Socialists and Fidesz, respectively. The remaining four parties contesting the European elections included the Hungarian Justice and Life Party, an extreme right/national-populist party that had been present in Parliament between 1998 and 2002 but failed to pass the 5% threshold in the last elections, as well as the communist Workers' Party, the Social Democratic Party, and the Hungarian National Alliance, all with negligible electoral support. The parliamentary parties were widely expected to win all 24 seats available to Hungary.

Somewhat unfortunately from the government's perspective, the European election took place two years after the April 2002 elections that it had narrowly won – well into the Hungarian legislative term.² The governing coalition introduced popular measures early on in the term – such as a 50% wage increase in the public sector, an annual pension bonus, and a simplified tax system for small businesses (entrepreneurs) – consequently enjoying a relatively prolonged 'honeymoon' with the voters. This was reflected in the landslide victory of the coalition parties and their allies in the autumn 2002 local (mayoral and council) elections, when they took 48.60% of the vote nation-wide, as opposed to 32.88% collected by Fidesz, the Democratic Forum and associated candidates. However, from 2003, large budget deficits, tensions with the National Bank on monetary policy, cut backs on the first-home-assistance programme, and (an attempt at) privatisation in health care gradually eroded voters' confidence in the government.

By 2004, the mid-term blues had clearly set in, with much discussion in the media focusing on the coalition's record as it reached the end of its second year in office in the final months of the European election campaign. Perhaps the most salient foreign policy issue, the continuing presence of Hungarian troops in Iraq was also increasingly unpopular.³ Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy's approval ratings had sunk to an all-time low by March 2004, when only 25% of respondents in a Gallup poll felt he was doing a reasonably good job. Although by May this improved to 37%, most (48%) remained dissatisfied with his performance. The Socialist Party also narrowed the popularity gap between itself and Fidesz between March and May, but it still tailed the largest opposition party, according to some polls, by as much as 17% among

² See: A.Batory, "Europe and the Hungarian Parliamentary Elections of April 2002", *Opposing Europe Research Network/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 1*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2002 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/paper1hungary.pdf>.

³ In April 2004, 77% of respondents wanted the withdrawal of Hungarian troops from Iraq in the near future. Gallup poll viewed at www.gallup.hu/gallup/release/irak040630.htm.

respondents with a party preference.⁴ Fidesz, naturally, did not fail to capitalise on this, drawing attention to policy areas and issues on which the government was seen not to have delivered.

Another significant event of the legislative term, the referendum on EU accession, was held in April 2003. The results reflected broad if shallow public support for Hungary's EU membership, with 83.76% of ballots cast in favour.⁵ However, turnout was an unexpectedly low 45%, giving a clear warning that voters tended not to have strong feelings about the 'European issue' – a lesson that, judging from the campaign in 2004, Hungarian parties may have learned all too well. This is not to say that the Hungarian public – traditionally one of the strongest supporters of EU accession among candidate (now new member) states – became particularly disenchanted with the EU. According to the spring 2004 Eurobarometer poll, the relative majority (45%) felt that EU membership was a 'good thing' (slightly above the average in the ten new member states) while only 15% thought it was 'bad'. However, the year between the referendum and the European elections clearly saw support sinking, with the approval of membership down by 11% from 56% in the previous Eurobarometer poll, with every third respondent (32%) stating indifference.⁶

All four parliamentary parties had been in favour of joining the Union at the time of the referendum, and have continued to support EU membership. Of the four parties, Fidesz has traditionally been the most likely to employ a soft-Eurosceptic rhetoric, voicing reservations about the conditions of membership (particularly in late 2002 and early 2003) or on particular EU policies whilst generally favouring a 'Europe of nation states'. The most consistently pro-EU/pro-integration party, throughout the entire period since regime change, has been the Alliance of Free Democrats, with the Socialists taking the middle ground. Voters' attitudes seem to correspond to the general disposition of their preferred parties, with Free Democrat sympathisers most, and those in the Fidesz camp least, supportive of Hungarian EU membership, although differences have been rather nuanced.⁷

The campaign

These differences in parties' attitudes towards European integration may have set the stage for a campaign actually dealing with issues that the newly elected MEPs could have an impact on. However, against the background of mid-term disillusionment with the Socialist-Free Democrat government and a distinct lack of interest among voters,⁸ EU policy issues received little attention. For this, the parties – not

⁴ These figures probably exaggerate the government's unpopularity as a significant proportion of Socialist voters/sympathisers traditionally fail to declare their 'true' party preferences. The Prime Minister's approval ratings and party popularity are from the May 2004 Gallup poll at <http://www.gallup.hu/Gallup/release/EUpar1val/040520.htm>.

⁵ See: B. Fowler, "The Hungarian EU accession referendum, 12 April 2003", *Opposing Europe Research Network Referendum Briefing No 4*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2003 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/hungary4.pdf>.

⁶ See: *Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2004/1* (first results, May 2004).

⁷ On a scale of 1-100, SZDSZ supporters: 81, MSZP: 76, Fidesz: 73, MDF: 73. May 2004 Median poll. See: *Heti Világgazdaság*, 4 June 2004.

⁸ In a February 2004 Gallup poll, EU policy issues or the activity of the European Parliament were the least likely to be identified by Hungarian respondents as topics they felt the European election campaign should focus on. In other accession countries/new member states too, people felt that

unsurprisingly – mutually blamed their opponents, pointing at the European programmes they had each presented during the February campaign launch events (Fidesz produced a comprehensive, 120-page manifesto, while other parties published shorter outlines of their programmes). At the campaign launch, Fidesz put forward a list of nine, and the Socialists a list of ten, key issues/positions they each felt future Hungarian MEPs should work towards in the EP. Both lists called for the 24 MEPs to act together, regardless of party affiliation, in matters concerning the Union's budget, the protection of national minorities in the Union, and the establishment of mechanisms of cooperation among Hungarian political forces. In addition, Fidesz's list featured the objective of a 'one-speed EU', equal rights for Hungarians, and the protection of farmers and small and medium-sized enterprises. The Socialists' list included lifting still existing restrictions in (old) member states to the free movement of labour, further enlargement, and fighting poverty.

EU policy issues addressed during the campaign included the EU budget (with all four parties pledging to maximise transfers to Hungary and denouncing breach of the Stability Pact by 'some large member states'), the future President of the Commission (with parties pledging support to candidates to be nominated by their respective transnational party groups), and institutional aspects of the EU constitution (with parties insisting on the principle of 'one country – one commissioner' and accepting the idea of a double majority requirement). However, none of these questions or policy areas emerged as salient issues in the campaign, with the consequence that the parties' positions remained practically indistinguishable for the average voter.

The question as to whether the constitution should make reference to Europe's Christian roots sparked some controversy. Fidesz and the Democratic Forum (both socially conservative parties with ties to the church) strongly favoured this proposal, while the more secular Socialists – although not objecting explicitly – would have preferred other member states to take the initiative. The debate came alive in March when a high-profile Socialist MEP candidate made a, perhaps unintentionally, strongly worded claim in an unedited interview that the Vatican was trying to hijack ('nick' and 'swallow') the integration process. With Fidesz strongly protesting to this portrayal of the Catholic Church and demanding the candidate's removal from the Socialists' list (which MSZP promptly rejected), the incident highlighted some important differences in the values that the two opposing camps believed should underpin European integration.

The campaign of the Free Democrats was, to some extent, an exception to the general pattern, as it did emphasise a number of simple 'European' messages: more EU support for cities/towns rather than the countryside; 'no' to restrictions on labour mobility; a cheaper and less bureaucratic EU administration; lower taxes and continuing tax competition among member states. Apart from the second one, these programme points were unique to the Free Democrats, and the call for more support for cities (could have) had relevance for the party's predominantly urban electoral base while also being well-suited to its top candidate, Budapest mayor Gábor Demszky. Eventually, however, the European content of this party's campaign was

employment, the agriculture and other domestic policy concerns should take centre stage in the campaigns. See: Gallup Hungary at www.gallup.hu/Gallup/reslease/Euparlval/040304.htm, and *Candidate Countries Eurobarometer* 2004/1.

also pushed to the sidelines as domestic political concerns and issues took centre stage.

The months in the run up to the election were dominated by various policy proposals and initiatives designed to appeal to the broadest possible segment of the electorate. Some of these were distinctly populist in nature, and none had much to do with the direction European integration should take or policies that were within the EP's competence. In February 2004, the Prime Minister took the opposition (and presumably some members of the governing parties) by surprise when, in the course of his 'state-of-the-nation' address, he called for a single list of MEP candidates jointly nominated by all parties, the direct election of the President of the Republic (presently elected by Parliament), and the radical reduction of the number of deputies in the national assembly. He later explained that a joint, single list would symbolise 'national unity' and added that he was ready to put his propositions directly to the people by initiating a referendum, should 'the parties' sweep them under the carpet. Commentators pointed out that the referendum would be unconstitutional, and both the opposition parties and the junior coalition partner Free Democrats rejected the idea of a joint list, which thus died an early death. Political analysts commonly assumed that the proposal's aim was to boost Péter Medgyessy's faltering popularity by appealing to the still widespread anti-politics/anti-party sentiments among the voters.

Fidesz similarly decided to appeal directly to the people, asking voters to sign a 'National petition', prominently displayed by activists in public places as well as on the party's website, the purpose of which was not to initiate a referendum but, presumably, to personally involve sympathisers. The document demanded that the government restore the first-home-assistance programme to its earlier high levels, stop privatisation, defend Hungarian jobs, decrease the price of pharmaceuticals, freeze hospital privatisation, give more support the farmers, and guarantee that gas and energy prices would not rise by more than 5% a year. The petition – later likened, 'in some respects', by the Free Democrats to a communist manifesto – made no provisions as to where public funds would be found for putting the suggested policies into practice. The over one million signatures (the precise figure has been called into question) collected however testified to Fidesz' renowned ability to strike a popular chord with the electorate.

Perhaps similar in nature, although faring incomparably worse, was the attempt of the old-style communist Workers Party – outside mainstream politics for the past 15 years – to collect the constitutionally required number of signatures for a popular initiative on one of the hottest political topics of the first half of 2004. The referendum, which the party proposed be called for the day of the European election, was supposed to prevent the government from privatising hospitals. Perhaps unfortunately from the Workers' Party's perspective, the Constitutional Court vetoed the legislation in question, thereby rendering the referendum idea pointless before the end of the campaign. This, however, did not deter the party, which decided to stick to its flagship policy regardless of these developments. Despite the Workers Party's well-known reservations about Hungarian EU membership, its campaign largely passed up the chance to express an opinion about European integration.

The two smaller parliamentary parties too focused on the most popular elements of their domestic agenda. The Free Democrats stressed a cornerstone of their 2002 election manifesto, the reduction of taxes, generally in conjunction with references to the need to roll back the boundaries of the state and level out the playing field while providing support to those in genuine need – what they labelled, in short, as ‘the liberal alternative’. The Democratic Forum took a stand on withdrawing Hungarian troops from Iraq, an issue overwhelmingly supported by public opinion. Another cornerstone of the party’s campaign was the claim that the Forum alone remained outside the circles of corruption and sleaze which they suggested bound the Hungarian Socialist Party and Fidesz together. Again, playing on anti-elite sentiments and directing them against the two major parties may have been judged key to helping the Forum over the 5% threshold, which many polls predicted it would be unable to do.

The Forum’s campaign was also the most focused on its top candidate. As one of the most popular Hungarian politicians, party leader Ibolya Dávid was seen to be the Forum’s greatest electoral asset,⁹ despite the fact that Ms David announced well in advance that she would ‘pass on’ her seat to the relatively unknown second candidate on the MDF list. The Socialists followed a similar strategy by putting two ‘heavyweights’, party leader and foreign minister László Kovács and former prime minister Gyula Horn in the two leading positions, both of whom were known not to intend moving to Strasbourg/Brussels. In contrast, Fidesz decided not to include in the list its ‘brand name’, party leader Viktor Orbán – who nonetheless did most of the campaigning – but to give leading positions to candidates who would actually take their mandates. Combining these strategies, the Free Democrats’ high-profile top man, Gábor Demszky committed himself to doing two jobs in the future, commuting between the EP and his mayoral office in Budapest.

A notable absence from the campaign were the hard Eurosceptics, particularly István Csurka’s Hungarian Justice and Life Party. The party never recovered fully from the electoral defeat of 2002, which left it outside Parliament and, consequently, without the state subsidies and publicity it had received in the previous term. It seems that the party had used up its remaining ammunition a year earlier in the run up to the referendum, although lack of funding had also prevented it then from making a real mark on the campaign. While the party leadership continued to protest against what they felt was deliberate exclusion from debate and the media (due to, as a statement explained, political manipulation and ‘orders from Israel’), much of its anti-EU rhetoric went largely unnoticed in 2004.

In the final weeks of the campaign, public attention focused on the duel between the Socialists and Fidesz in what was almost a re-run of the heated and bitterly fought battle of 2002, albeit with less popular involvement. Fidesz’s campaign concentrated on discrediting the government, with the party leadership systematically contrasting the government’s record with the Socialists’ 2002 manifesto pledges on a wide range of issues from gas prices to foreign indebtedness, portrayed as a series of broken promises. This was complemented by the suggestion of generous welfare measures as Fidesz’ own programme, set out in the National Petition and summed up in the slogan

⁹ Ibolya Dávid was indeed the best known and most popular of the politicians heading the four parliamentary parties’ respective lists. See: May 2004 Median poll, *Heti Világgazdaság*, 4 July 2004.

‘Jobs, homes, security’. Finally, the party employed scare tactics, with leaflets and Fidesz leaders warning of a dramatic increase of petrol, medicine and food prices, should the governing parties win, as well as alleged government plans of introducing austerity measures compared to which the economic shock therapy of the mid-1990s would pale into insignificance.

For much of the period leading up to the election, the Socialist Party was put on the defensive, with its campaign material largely devoted to disputing Fidesz’s charges and claiming that the country was better off than had been under the previous (Fidesz) government. It also sought to portray Fidesz as a trouble-maker full of empty promises – one slogan proclaimed that ‘While others talk, the Socialist Party gets the work done.’ However, with the polls predicting a Fidesz victory, the Socialists changed gear in the last weeks of the campaign and went on the offensive. The new slogan – ‘Put a stop to the [Fidesz] lie-factory’ – exemplified a considerably more aggressive tone designed to shift attention away from the party’s own record to that of Fidesz.

Results and analysis

In the event, this late change in the Socialists’ strategy proved insufficient (and probably inappropriate) for turning the campaign around. The undisputed winner of the first European election in Hungary was Fidesz, which received 400,000 votes or 13% more than the Socialists. The two smaller parliamentary parties also did well, with the Free Democrats securing the highest share of vote in any national poll in the past ten years, and the Democratic Forum, against all odds, scraping past the 5% threshold. As expected, none of the small extra-parliamentary parties got even near to electing an MEP from their lists. The composition of the cohort of new Hungarian MEPs was as follows: Fidesz 12, Socialist Party 9, Free Democrats 2, Democratic Forum 1 (see Table 1 below). Had there been one more seat available to Hungary in the EP, it would have gone to Fidesz too.

Table 1. The 13 June 2004 European Parliamentary election in Hungary

Party list	Number of votes	Share of vote (%)	Number of seats
FIDESZ-HUNGARIAN CIVIC ALLIANCE (FIDESZ-MPSZ)	1 457 750	47.40	12
HUNGARIAN SOCIALIST PARTY (MSZP)	1 054 921	34.30	9
ALLIANCE OF FREE DEMOCRATS (SZDSZ)	237 908	7.74	2
HUNGARIAN DEMOCRATIC FORUM (MDF)	164 025	5.33	1
HUNGARIAN JUSTICE AND LIFE PARTY (MIÉP)*	72 203	2.35	-
WORKERS PARTY (MP)*	56 221	1.83	-
HUNGARIAN NATIONAL ALLIANCE (MNSZ)*	20 226	0.66	-
SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (SZDP)*	12 196	0.40	-

* Failed to pass the electoral threshold of 5%.

Source: National Election Committee (www.valasztas.hu)

At 38.5%, turnout was disappointingly – but perhaps not unexpectedly – low, at least in comparison with earlier elections in Hungary, although still considerably higher than in some other new member states (for example, 20.8% in Poland and just 16.9%

in Slovakia). The highest turnout in the history of post-1990 elections in Hungary was recorded in the second round of the 2002 parliamentary elections, when, at 73.4%, nearly 1.5 million more voters (a total of 4,423,806 people) cast a ballot than in June 2004.¹⁰ The European election mobilised the voters considerably less than even the last local election in 2002, when turnout was 51.1% (over 5% up from the previous local election in 1998). Comparisons with referendums are also not favourable to the European election, although in this case the gap in participation is smaller: 10% more (48.6%) turned out to express an opinion on NATO membership in 1997, and 7% more (45.6%) in the case of the April 2003 referendum on accession to the EU.¹¹

Interestingly, the number of ballots that were cast in favour of EU membership (3,056,027) in the 2003 referendum is almost the same as the number of votes in the European election of June 2004 (3,097,657). It is tempting to conclude, rather neatly, that the same voters who were sufficiently committed to EU membership to support it in the referendum were now expressing a preference on who should represent them in the EP, but data are not available to substantiate this claim. The results also suggest otherwise. As was mentioned earlier, Fidesz voters were generally less enthusiastic about the EU than Socialist or especially Free Democrat voters and were consequently underrepresented in the 'Yes' camp of the referendum.¹² In contrast, every second person participating in the European election backed Fidesz, considerably more than the Socialists.

Part of the explanation is an electoral swing from the larger governing party to the opposition, reflecting a high proportion of protest votes rather than, necessarily, a long-term change of political allegiances. However, differential mobilisation between the government and opposition camps also played an important part: Fidesz supporters, still discontent about their party so narrowly missing a second term in office in 2002, were more prone to use this opportunity to express their disapproval of the current government than other voters were. In this respect, the last minute negative campaign of the Socialists may have been counterproductive, as it seemed to mobilise Fidesz voters against the government rather than persuade Socialist Party supporters to rally around the party. A large part of the latter group seems to have preferred to stay at home.

This brings us to the question of interpreting the abstention of approximately five million Hungarian citizens, representing half the country's population and nearly two-thirds of the electorate. Is the silent majority Eurosceptic, indifferent, or are there other factors at work? The previously mentioned Eurobarometer data offers little support to the first proposition: while there certainly is a not insignificant group of people who believe that the EU is a 'bad thing' (16% in spring 2004), indifference is far more common. After the similarly sparsely attended referendum, four in five Hungarians said that they were pleased about the 'Yes' result – a far higher proportion than that of the number of people who had actually bothered to vote. This also

¹⁰ The lowest turnout in a first round was recorded in 1998 (56.3%) and in a second round in the founding elections of 1990, when just 45.4% of the electorate voted.

¹¹ All figures from the National Election Committee's website at www.valasztas.hu.

¹² After the referendum 40% of Fidesz voters said that they had not participated, while the corresponding figure for Socialist Party supporters is only 20%. See: Hungarian Gallup poll, *Népszabadság*, 3 April 2003, quoted in Fowler, 'The Hungarian EU accession referendum'.

suggests that low turnout has relatively little to do with resistance or hostility to the EU.

A commonly offered explanation for low turnout holds that the public has little understanding of how the EU works or why people should concern themselves with the EP. However, the Eurobarometer poll found that in spring 2004 21% of Hungarian respondents (the highest proportion in the post-communist new member states) felt that the EP had ‘a great effect’, and a further 42% that it had ‘some effect’ on their lives, which suggests that people did attach some significance to the institution, albeit considerably less than to the national parliament and government.¹³ The nature of the campaign therefore seems to be a more important factor. On the one hand, it gave voters the impression that the European election was a chance to express their opinion about the government, rather than the EU or the MEP candidates’ proposed European policy agendas, about which, in any case, most parties told them relatively little. On the other hand, it had no direct, practical impact on government-opposition relations in terms of which the debate was framed, as it had been clear that the electoral defeat of the governing parties would not lead to their resignation.¹⁴

As for the parties’ performance, the results are what one would expect on the basis of the ‘second order election’ model (as are low turnout and the dominance of domestic politics in the campaign).¹⁵ Given that the election took place almost exactly half way through the national electoral cycle, and consequently Hungary had a highly unpopular government in office, the dominant force of the coalition suffered a grave loss. The junior coalition partner, which could have been expected to fare likewise, avoided this fate because it was not seen to be as closely associated with the government’s unpopular policies as the Socialists. The Free Democrats reinforced this impression by a clever campaign in which they distanced themselves from the Socialists (claiming that their influence in the coalition was insufficient to get the ‘right’ policies through) and by emphasising ideological differences between themselves and their allies. The slogan ‘Liberals to the Union – now!’ summed up the party’s key message that, as an independent force, it stood apart from both the socialist and the conservative (Fidesz) pole of the political spectrum.

The second order election model would also predict that small, extreme parties do well. Arguably, this may have been the case if there was any ‘room’ on the right, but Fidesz had successfully crowded out the Justice Party as well as other extreme right groupings in domestic politics and – what could have given hard Eurosceptics a competitive edge – the parties’ positions on ‘Europe’ played little role. As for extra-parliamentary parties on the far left, the Workers Party was largely ignored by both the vast majority of voters and the mainstream Socialists. On the other hand, small parliamentary parties performed well, owing largely to the ‘second order logic’, i.e., that voters’ party preferences are not ‘distorted’ by strategic thinking about the relative value of their votes for government formation. The Free Democrats and the Democratic Forum consequently secured votes from people whose support for the

¹³ See: *Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2004/1*.

¹⁴ Only 15% of respondents believed that the government should resign in case Fidesz won the European election. See: May 2004 Median poll, *Heti Világgazdaság*, 4 July 2004.

¹⁵ See: K. Reif & H. Schmitt, ‘Nine second order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results’, *European Journal of Political Research* 8 (1980), pp.3-44.

Socialists would not have been so easily swayed in first order (national parliamentary) elections, when that party and Fidesz are the only serious contenders for office.¹⁶

Conclusion and future prospects

The first European election in Hungary sadly repeated the pattern well-known from long(er)-standing member states: even the active part of the electorate felt that the main purpose of the exercise was to send a signal to the prime minister's office, rather than to send representatives to the EP. Public attitudes may change gradually if political parties use European elections as an opportunity to debate the future direction of European integration or EU policy issues, but in 2004 in Hungary this was not the case. The most important consequences of the election for domestic politics can be summarised as follows:

- The outcome should act as a wake-up call for the Socialist Party. Indeed, there are already signs that the leadership of the party will change, with party chairman László Kovács – generally considered as a skilful politician but also a member of the old guard – announcing that he will not run for re-election in autumn 2004. The outcome of the leadership contest will have important consequences for the government's agenda in the remaining two years of the current legislative term as well as the Socialists' re-election strategy and the selection of their prime ministerial candidate for 2006. The defeat in the European election may well strengthen the younger generation of the Socialist leadership, many of whom call for a shift towards a more decisive social democratic programme with a strong(er) emphasis on social justice.
- The Free Democrats are likely to capitalise on their good performance by pushing for more visibility and influence within the governing coalition, particularly as their campaign was based on portraying the party as a distinctive political force ('the liberal alternative'), a strategy that the results vindicated. However, (some of) the Free Democrats neo-liberal economic policies sit uneasily with the Socialists' preferences. This could easily lead to tensions within the coalition particularly towards the end of the term, when the government will face strong incentives to increase welfare spending.
- The results convincingly demonstrated the success of Fidesz's campaign and party organisation, which had been re-organised following the electoral defeat of 2002, in mobilising the electorate. The key challenge for the party is to keep the Socialists on the defensive and consolidate the high levels of support it now enjoys until the 2006 elections. With Fidesz beating the Socialists to the first place in the European election, the party is likely to claim a greater say in EU as well as domestic policy for the remaining part of the legislative term.
- The Democratic Forum's ability to pass the threshold independently is likely to reinforce the position of party leader Ibolya Dávid vis-à-vis her internal opposition. The Forum is divided between a group of MPs who would wish to see

¹⁶ Polling data suggests that it was potential Socialist supporters who helped the Forum over the electoral threshold, while Fidesz's base was considerably less affected by this challenge from the centre-right. See: May 2004 Median poll, *Heti Világgazdaság*, 4 July 2004.

closer ties between the Forum and Fidesz on the one hand and the party leader and her supporters on the other. In 2002, the party contested the elections with a joint list with Fidesz, which guaranteed success in getting a small number of MPs into Parliament but, with the Forum dwarfed by Fidesz, also strongly reduced its visibility and distinctiveness for the electorate. The European elections were widely seen as a test of Ms David's strategy of distancing the Forum from Fidesz and steering it towards the political centre, thereby attempting to attract additional electoral support both from discontented Socialist sympathisers and moderate right-wing voters put off by Fidesz's rhetoric. With the relative success of its independent campaign in 2004, the Forum is far more likely to contest the 2006 parliamentary election alone than it would have been otherwise.

The outcome of the election says little about the preferences of the voters on European integration or EU policy issues, although the almost complete absence of electoral support for hard Eurosceptics does indicate that lukewarm support for, or indifference about, 'Europe' are still the dominant attitudes among the public. Low turnout in Hungary and across Central and Eastern Europe is perhaps the most important message for the EU: citizens in the new member states failed to muster any energy for understanding, and any enthusiasm for trying to influence, what goes on inside this complex institution. The perception that decisions are made too far from 'real people' seems to be all too common in the post-communist entrants, where the EU-wide sense of alienation from 'Brussels' is aggravated by a general mistrust in the political elite. This, and parties' failure to compete on a European agenda are the main reasons for the anti-climax of the first European election in Hungary.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>