RIIA/OERN ELECTION BRIEFING PAPER

RIIA/OERN ELECTION BRIEFING NO 1

EUROPE AND THE HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF APRIL 2002

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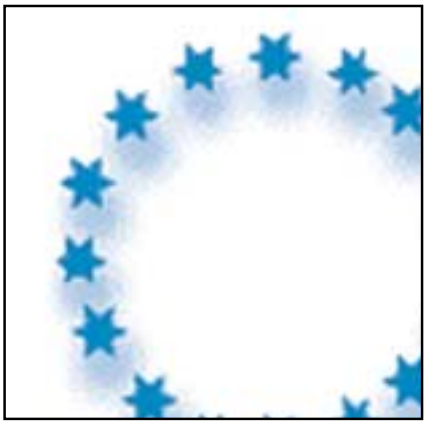

Key points:

- **The incumbent centre-right Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Party–Democratic Forum alliance failed to secure an absolute majority; the Hungarian Socialist Party forms the new government with the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats.**
- **Owing to the tight contest and unusually intensive campaigning, turnout was the highest since 1990.**
- **The issue of EU accession played little role in the campaigns and appeared to have no significant impact on party choice.**
- **Eurosceptic parties fared badly; the extreme right is excluded from parliament.**
- **The elections indicate a firmly entrenched two-bloc system among the parliamentary parties.**

Introduction

Preparing for the upcoming elections with its junior coalition partner Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), in early 2002 the Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Party (Fidesz–MPP) stood a good chance of winning a second term in office – a rare event in East Central Europe generally and unprecedented in post-communist politics in Hungary. Despite high levels of electoral volatility experienced in the three elections since the regime change, in the run-up to the elections all public opinion polls showed a lead for the incumbent centre-right coalition of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

TABLE 1: THE APRIL 2002 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN HUNGARY

	Share of vote			Number (and % share) of seats	
	1st round		2nd round [a]		
	Party lists	S. M. D.[b]	S. M. D.	1998	2002
Fidesz–MPP	41.1[c]	39.5	50	148 (38.3)	188 (48.7)
MDF				17 (4.4)	
FKGP	0.8	1.2	-	48 (12.4)	-
MSZP	42.0	40.5	46.8	134 (34.7)	178 (46.1)
SZDSZ	5.6	6.8	3.1	24 (6.2)	20 (5.2)[d]
MIÉP	4.4	4.6	-	14 (3.6)	-
Other	6.1	5.2	0.1	1 (0.2)[e]	-
Total	100	100	100	386 (100)	386 (100)

[a] Of the 176 single-member districts, 131 held second rounds (in the remaining 45 districts mandates had been decided in the first round). In this column, the share of vote received by the two joint MSZP-SZDSZ candidates is evenly divided between the two parties.
[b] Single-member districts.
[c] Joint Fidesz–MPP–MDF list.
[d] Includes one joint MSZP–SZDSZ candidate.
[e] In 1998, one independent candidate was also elected.
Sources: Shares of vote in first round and final results (mandates): official results from *www.valasztas.hu;* share of vote in single-member districts in the second round, Heti Világgazdaság, 25 April 2002 (HVG calculation following second round).

However, in the first round on 7 April the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), the now social-democratic successor of the communist-era state party, emerged as the likely winner, if only by a very small margin. Voters cast double ballots – one for a party and another for an individual candidate – according to the subsequently amended electoral law of 1989. The law introduced a complicated mixed electoral system with a second round which, by deciding in most single-member districts, is as important as the first one. The parties' support had a distinct geographical pattern with the joint list of the governing Fidesz–MPP and MDF doing well in the countryside and Budapest and other large cities turning out to be centre-left strongholds.[1] Although Fidesz–MPP then secured the relative majority of the mandates in the 21 April second round, this was insufficient for a parliamentary majority: the party increased the number of its seats but lost the coalition game and therefore the chance for a second term in office. Shortly after the elections the President of the Republic indicated that he would ask the Socialists' prime ministerial candidate, Péter Medgyessy, to form a government, which MSZP announced that it would do in coalition with the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). The two parties have a majority of merely 10 seats in the 386-member parliament.

The April 2002 poll was exceptional in terms of the results it produced, indicating a now firmly entrenched two-bloc system among the parliamentary parties. While in 1990, 1994, and 1998 six parties established groups in the National Assembly, in the 2002–06 term only four will be represented: the conservative Fidesz–MPP and its ally, the small Christian-democratic MDF in opposition and the Socialists and the liberal Free Democrats in government. Two parliamentary parties of the 1998–2002 term, the extreme-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP) and a member of the governing coalition, the agrarian Independent Smallholder Party (FKGP), failed to pass the threshold set by the electoral law at 5 per cent. The tight contest ensured that, at 71 per cent in the first round and over 73 per cent in the second, turnout was the highest in Hungary since the first free elections; in fact, higher than in the founding election of 1990 itself. Interestingly, frantic campaigning on both sides in the run-up and between the two rounds had little to do with what is likely to be the single most important event of the 2002–06 term: the accession of Hungary to the European Union.

Background

The 2002 election was the second to be decided primarily by the battle between Fidesz–MPP and MSZP. In both 1998 and 2002 these parties together received

over 80 per cent of votes and mandates in parliament, with other parties – including MDF and SZDSZ, the dominant parties of the democratic transition period and the first term – forced to fall into line by aligning themselves with one or the other from the mid- to the late 1990s. MSZP, founded by the reform wing of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party in 1989, won a landslide victory in 1994. Despite its absolute majority, the party opted for a coalition with SZDSZ – the successor of the radical anti-communist Democratic Opposition of the former regime – thereby blurring the regime-change cleavage that is otherwise common in post-communist party systems. The right-wing camp was initially more fragmented. Having transformed itself from a radical, liberal youth movement to a major conservative catch-all party, Fidesz–MPP, however, succeeded in taking over the leadership of the opposition between 1994 and 1998 by marginalizing or co-opting its smaller competitors and forging a coalition, with the participation of MDF and FKGP, capable of replacing the MSZP–SZDSZ government in 1998.[2] The national-populist MIÉP, originally a radical MDF splinter, entered parliament for the first time in 1998 as an outsider to the two-bloc battle, but subsequently tended to vote with the Fidesz-led government rather than the opposition.

The ideological divisions within the party system relate to liberal v. conservative and nationally oriented v. more cosmopolitan/universal values on the one hand and socio-economic policy on the other. The centre-left MSZP and SZDSZ are liberal and secular in outlook and, from the West European point of view, somewhat paradoxically more free-market-minded than the centre-right parties are. The first Socialist–Free Democrat coalition was renowned for implementing a highly unpopular neo-liberal austerity package in the mid-1990s, which set the economy on the growth course that enabled its successor, the Fidesz–FKGP–MDF government, to increase welfare spending from the late 1990s. In 2002, MSZP and SZDSZ advocated social policies favouring low-income strata while generally keeping the level of central redistribution low. The centre-right parties focused their rhetoric on national and Christian values. The Orbán government's programme targeted welfare spending on the middle class and, while relatively liberal in economic policy, at times directly intervened in the market during its tenure in office.

In foreign policy, the mainstream parties converged on three basic objectives in the 1990s: EU and NATO accession (Hungary joined the Alliance in 1999); the representation of the interests of Hungarian-speakers living in the countries neighbouring Hungary (primarily in Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine); and maintaining close bilateral relations with countries in Hungary's geographical proximity. As for the first goal, all post-communist governments have actively participated in the quest for EU membership: the first, MDF-led government concluded an Association Agreement and applied for EU membership in 1994. The second, MSZP-SZDSZ cabinet prepared the ground for NATO and EU accession and participated in the opening of negotiations with the Union in 1998. The last conservative coalition conducted the negotiations and closed 24 of the 31 chapters of the acquis communautaire to date. The combined efforts of the three post-communist governments have made Hungary one of the most likely first entrants in the upcoming wave of EU enlargement.

However, the parties' priorities and the relative weight given to the three basic foreign policy objectives differed, with conservative governments – the MDF-led coalition of 1990–94 as well as the Fidesz-led coalition of 1998–2002 – generally seen to emphasize the role of Hungary as a kin-state or motherland for ethnic Hungarians most strongly, or at least more strongly than MSZP and SZDSZ. In spite of Romanian and Slovak opposition and indications of EU disapproval, in 2001 Viktor Orbán's government adopted legislation – known as the 'status law' – granting economic and cultural rights in Hungary to ethnic Hungarian citizens of the neighbouring countries. The law was supported in parliament by MSZP as well as the governing parties, but rejected by SZDSZ on the grounds that it ran contrary to the logic of European integration and did not serve the interests of either Hungarian citizens or Hungarians in minority status. Both opposition parties objected to an agreement between Prime Minister Orbán and his Romanian counterpart in December 2001, extending the benefits arising from the status law to all Romanian citizens. The crumbling of the 'foreign policy consensus' on the three basic goals became apparent towards the end of the term of office.

The campaigns

The 2002 elections saw probably the most heated debates of post-communist politics in Hungary, with the two major parties' confrontation unusually strongly mobilizing the electorate. The campaigns on both sides aimed precisely at this, on the part of the Socialists and Free Democrats from the beginning, and for Fidesz–MPP and MDF following the first round in which, unexpectedly, MSZP finished one per cent ahead. In 1998 MSZP and SZDSZ, relatively confident in their chances of winning, had fought a lacklustre campaign – a mistake that they were clearly determined not to make again. In the face of public opinion data indicating a Fidesz-MDF victory, it was clear that the Socialists could only hope to succeed by

ensuring that their supporters' willingness to vote would exceed that of the opposite camp's. Consequently, their message to the electorate, shared by the Free Democrats, centred on the theme of change and on the imperative of cleaning up public life, which tapped into discontent against the government.

Fidesz–MPP and its principal ally MDF initially concentrated on their record in office, contrasting what they portrayed as nationally-minded politics and generous benefits for most strata in society during their tenure with the less prosperous years under the Socialist-Free Democrat coalition. Following the first round, however, Viktor Orbán and his team changed gear, fighting a considerably more aggressive campaign. Fidesz-MDF warned that a new MSZP–SZDSZ government would return to the financial austerity of the mid-1990s and seek the favours of Western investors and big business rather than the good of the people.[3] Thus the campaigns on both sides aimed at raising the stakes among the electorate by focusing primarily on highly salient questions – bread-and-butter issues, corruption and sleaze, and the defence of democratic institutions against their opponents – in a highly confrontational manner.

Given that foreign policy generally, and European integration and EU accession specifically, were clearly not among the salient issues for the electorate, it is perhaps not unexpected that they played relatively little part in the campaigns. The differences between MSZP and SZDSZ on the one hand and Fidesz–MPP and MDF on the other were more visible in terms of style and presentation than substantive issues of European policy and the accession negotiations. Both Fidesz–MPP and MSZP pledged consistently to defend the national interest abroad, including the negotiations in Brussels, and accused one another of either betraying it by siding with foreign negation partners in their criticism of Orbán's policies (as the government claimed about the opposition) or being incompetent in achieving it (the opposition about the government). MSZP chairman Laszlo Kovacs called for an end to the aggressive tone and unnecessarily confrontations[4] which, according to the Socialists, characterized the Orbán government's foreign policy, while Medgyessy argued that Orbán's 'Eurosceptic' statements drew the government's commitment to EU membership into question.[5] Prime Minister Orbán maintained that, in contrast with the Socialists, his party, as centre-right parties generally, 'defend the national interest more openly and do not have the tendency to accept and use the style known from the fashionable European Union discourse of the day'.[6] Like MSZP and Fidesz–MPP, the smaller parties too formulated their programmes on the EU in terms of broad messages, often leaving the question of priorities open and paying relatively little attention to what their policies might be beyond the accession negotiations, although the Free Democrat manifesto was somewhat more detailed. That party also emphasized its pro-Europeanness perhaps more strongly than others, running on the slogan 'the party of European Hungary'. At the other end of the Europhile v. Eurosceptic spectrum, the rhetoric of the Hungarian Justice and Life Party left little doubt about its lack of enthusiasm for the European project. MIÉP warned in its manifesto that EU membership could lead to exploitation and colonisation by the West, rejecting accession as long as wage disparities between Hungary and the EU countries do not substantially decrease, for instance. These views were, however, expressed as part and parcel of the party's general nationalistic protest language – consisting of anti-West, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalization slogans – and seemed to make little independent impact.

There was only one specific, accession-related issue of some salience in the campaigns: the question of the liberalization of land ownership and, to a lesser extent and in conjunction with it, the European Commission's proposal on a 10-year-long transition period to be applied in relation to direct agricultural subsidies following membership. The government's provisional agreement with the EU in the negotiations to allow the acquisition of farmland by EU nationals three or seven years after Hungary's accession was strongly contested in the domestic debate, with public opinion overwhelmingly supporting the idea that land should be reserved for Hungarians. To varying degrees and on different grounds, the parties in the opposition used the opportunity to play the 'national interest' card – often Fidesz–MPP's own strategy – in criticizing and/or unequivocally rejecting the deal. MSZP's Medgyessy proposed to consider renegotiating with the EU the 'hasty deal', in return for which he claimed Orbán achieved nothing.[7] (MIÉP ruled out EU accession unless the country received a '100 per cent guarantee that all Hungarian land will remain in Hungarian ownership',[8] while the rump of the divided Smallholder Party ran on the slogan 'the motherland is not for sale'. However, there is little to suggest that even this issue had a significant impact on party preferences among the electorate.

Analysis and outlook

In the event, the centre-left's unexpected, narrow victory was a result primarily of two factors. First, high turnout, coupled with the electoral system's effect of 'dividing' the electorate between the two largest parties' camps for the second round, effectively excluded the least successful parties – MIÉP and FKGP –

from parliament. The failure of these parties to gain representation in turn weakened the right-wing, rather than the left-wing, camp. (It has to be noted that MIÉP's support did not decline in comparison with 1998 in absolute terms and its share of the vote was only marginally less than that of the mainstream SZDSZ).

Second, inter-party relations were pivotal for the outcome. In a contest between MSZP and Fidesz–MPP, the latter would probably have won; it did in fact fare somewhat better than MSZP. It was primarily the weakness of its natural allies – the smaller parties of the right – that denied it a second term in office. FKGP's disintegration is in part responsible for this, as the splitting of the socially conservative, Christian agrarian vote undoubtedly weakened the government's side. In part, however, the outcome can also be traced back to Fidesz–MPP's own earlier strategy of integrating the centre-right under its own banner, the residual effect of which was the marginalization of its ideologically similar competitors. Having crowded out these parties, Fidesz–MPP became the centre-right 'front' by itself, while being unable to secure an absolute majority alone. In contrast, the centre-left succeeded in minimizing intra-bloc vote losses: the Socialists could rely on the Free Democrats' support, with that party withdrawing the overwhelming majority of its candidates in favour of MSZP in the second round. Following their party's advice to vote Socialist on 21 April, the Free Democrats' small but disciplined electoral basis was crucial in achieving the 10-seat centre-left majority.

The fact that 'Europe' was not emphasized as much as could have been expected in an election that would decide which parti(es) will take the country into the Union had a lot to do with the fate of the two parties that ran, to varying extents, on a Eurosceptic ticket. While claiming to be supportive of membership itself, the rump of FKGP sought to capitalize on rejecting the land ownership deal with the EU, which it – probably correctly – judged to have enormous relevance for its core agrarian basis. However, this strategy failed spectacularly, with the party receiving only a meagre one per cent in the first round, a small fraction of its 1998 support. Arguably, by the time of the election, the party was beyond salvation: owing to its highly publicized internal conflicts and eventual disintegration, FKGP lost all credibility with its one-time voters. The populist slogan thus made little difference.

MIÉP's case is more interesting in that, while voicing its reservations, the party refrained from explicitly rejecting EU membership during the campaign and, in fact, generally failed to emphasise its position on Europe. The most likely reason behind this was the party's efforts to be acceptable as future coalition partner to Fidesz–MPP, which MIÉP's leader judged to be a possible post-election scenario. In the event, this theory was not put to the test. MIÉP's failure to secure parliamentary representation however removed the constraints that have hitherto influenced its behaviour, and this may well lead to the adoption of a radical Eurosceptic message. The party's radicalization was already evident in the immediate aftermath of the elections. MIÉP's refusal to recognize the results and the new parliament as legitimate indicated a distinctly anti-establishment and anti-democratic shift in its rhetoric. In a party rally, the chairman explicitly called for EU membership to be rejected .[9] An intensification of the debate on accession can thus reasonably be expected in the coming years, particularly as the salience of the issue increases with the approaching referendum on Hungarian EU membership.

Endnotes

1 George Schöpflin, 'The Hungarian elections and beyond', *Radio Free Europe–Radio Liberty Newsline,* Endnote, 24 April 2002.

2 Brigid Fowler, 'Hungarian parliamentary elections, May 1998', *Electoral Studies* (1998), 17 (2): 257–62.

3 *Economist,* 25 April 2002.

4 László Kovács, 'A jóléti rendszerváltás külpolitikai programja' (The foreign policy of the programme of welfare regime change, MSZP election manifesto), 20 February 2002 (viewed at www.mszp.hu on 8 May 2002).

5 Magyar Távirati Iroda (MTI) (Hungarian News Agency), 1 February 2002.

6 MTI, 18 April 2002.

7 *Radio Free Europe–Radio Liberty Newsline*, 24 April 2002.

8 MIÉP, 'Választási program 2002: A MIÉP XII pontja' (Election manifesto 2002: MIÉP's 12 points) (viewed at www.miep.hu on 17 February 2002).

9 MTI, 5 May 2002.

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Convened from the Sussex European Institute, the Opposing European Research Network is a group of academic researchers studying party politics within the European Union and candidate countries and seeking to understand in particular why Euroscepticism exists in some states and not in others. Like the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the Network itself retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. The views presented are those of the authors.

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