

ELECTION BRIEFING No 51 EUROPE AND THE HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF APRIL 2010

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Key points:

- The Hungarian party system, for much of the past two decades one of the most stable (if not ossified) in Central and Eastern Europe, showed a dramatically different picture from the last parliamentary elections four years ago.
- The major opposition party Fidesz won 68% of the seats in parliament, a sufficiently large majority for amending the constitution if it so decides. The elections thus opened the way for large scale changes.
- The election results mainly reflect the voters' wish to 'punish' the incumbent government. All other parties entering parliament after the elections performed well, and they did so, to smaller or greater extent, at the Socialists' expense.
- The extreme right Jobbik came in as the third largest force, in Eastern Hungary even beating the governing Socialist Party to second place.
- With Jobbik and 'Politics Can Be Different', a green(ish)-liberal grouping, two new parties entered the national assembly for the first time, while two 'old' parties, the Democratic Forum and the Alliance of Free Democrats, respectively the largest and second largest parties in the 1990 first free elections, dropped out and all but disintegrated.
- The nature of the post-election changes the new government might introduce are difficult to predict, as the campaign (particularly the Fidesz campaign) was largely devoid of a policy debate or specific positions regarding substantive issues.
- Despite the fact that the Hungarian political spectrum now features pro-EU, Soft and Hard Eurosceptic parties alike, European issues played hardly any part at all in it.

Hungary's parliamentary elections, the fifth since the 1990 founding elections, took place on 11 and 24 April 2010. The only remnant of the stability and predictability that formerly characterised this party system is the fact that the government managed to survive a full four-year term. Considering the events of the past years, this is no small achievement, but one for which the governing Socialists may end up paying for many years to come.

The last parliamentary elections in 2006 returned the Socialist-Free Democrat coalition for a second term in office – a first in Hungary’s post-communist history – after a decidedly populist campaign in which the Socialists and the major opposition party Fidesz took turns to promise the voters more, largely disregarding economic realities including a budget deficit of over 9% at the time.¹ However, as the EPERN election note on the 2009 European elections reminds us,² only a few months after this (from the Socialists’ point of view) promising start, the new government suffered a massive drop in electoral support. In October 2006 mass demonstrations and riots took place in response to the leaking of a speech by prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsany at that May’s party conference, which ignited the anti-government sentiment that had been mounting since cutbacks in public spending were introduced earlier. In March 2008 the government lost a referendum on the introduction of small (approximately £1) payments in front-line healthcare delivery. This was followed by the departure of the junior partner, the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats, from the coalition. Resisting calls for its resignation, a minority Socialist government nonetheless stayed in office with Free Democrat backing in parliament, in the hope of recovering some lost electoral ground by 2010.

The fallout from the global economic crisis however re-wrote this plan, prompting the resignation of Mr Gyurcsany in March 2009. With ‘roughly 30% of Hungary’s public debt and about 60% of loans to businesses and individuals...denominated in foreign currencies’, the effects of the crisis were immediately felt in the country as the Forint started sliding. In April 2009 the Gyurcsany cabinet was replaced by a ‘government of experts’ under prime minister Gordon Bajnai, elected in parliament through a constructive vote of no-confidence and supported by the Socialists and Free Democrats. The new cabinet explicitly considered itself an interim government tasked with crisis management for the approximately one year left until the next elections. Mr Bajnai made it clear that he would not seek re-election. The sliding of the Forint (from mid-July to mid-October 2009 the national currency lost 22% of its value against the euro) was finally stopped by an EU-IMF bailout in October 2009, but unemployment figures had shot up.

In the meantime, the austerity measures Mr Bajnai announced delivered the *coup de grace* to the Socialists, who ended the June 2009 European elections with the smallest share of the vote that they had received since 1990.³ The Bajnai cabinet’s fiscal stabilisation plans were effective in significantly bringing down the deficit, but there was very little room for manoeuvre and, in any case, the IMF deal included conditionalities that ruled out a relaxation of the crisis measures as an option. A final blow to the Socialists in the run up to the 2010 elections was a number of noisy corruption scandals, perhaps the most notable of which was a series of revelations about large sums siphoned out of the (massively subsidised) Budapest public transport company.

With these factors combined it is no surprise that it was a very unpopular governing party that entered the race, facing off an exceptionally popular major opposition party. The latter, Fidesz, was a quintessential catch-all party, which had, for the past decade-and-a-half

¹ See: Nick Sitter and Agnes Batory, ‘Europe and the Hungarian Elections of April 2006’, European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 28 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernhungary2006.pdf>.

² See: Agnes Batory, ‘The European Parliament election in Hungary, June 7 2009’, European Parties Elections and Referendums Network EP Election Briefing No 25 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernep2009hungary.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

dominated the centre-right of the political spectrum. For the past 17 years, the leader of the party was Viktor Orban, Prime Minister between 1998 and 2002, whose position within Fidesz was not visibly weakened even by two successive electoral defeats (in 2002 and 2006) with him at the helm. Often described as centre-right - a label which reflects the party's dominant position on the right, rather than, necessarily, its policy preferences - Fidesz conceives of the 'nation' in cultural rather than civic terms, is rather more reserved about foreign capital and the market in general than the Socialists, and socially conservative. Its close ally, perhaps best described as a satellite party, is the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), which ran (as it did in 2006) on a joint list with Fidesz.

The Socialists were massively behind Fidesz in the polls for much of the past four years. Since the European elections of summer 2009, Fidesz's support among respondents who had a party preference and said were certain to vote was above 60%, whereas the Socialists polled only around the 20% mark within the same group of respondents. Consequently, from the point of view of the two major established parties, the question at stake at this election was simply how large the Fidesz victory would be, and whether the Socialists would salvage sufficient influence to provide at least some counter-balance to the Fidesz government in opposition. Another foregone conclusion was that the extreme right Jobbik ('Movement for a Better Hungary') would pass the 5% electoral threshold and enter parliament for the first time. The party had been propelled onto the political scene when securing 15% in the 2009 EP elections, polling barely behind the Socialists at the time. Jobbik is a standard extreme right party. Its advances in the polls were made even more worrisome to most observers by the party's relationship with a banned paramilitary organisation Magyar Garda (Hungarian Guard). The party maintained its popularity into 2010, but given that the national elections were likely to attract far higher turnout than the EP elections, when just 36% of the voters showed up at the polls, just how well Jobbik would do was an open question.

To some extent, it was unclear how liberal voters would behave: they lost their natural 'home', the Alliance of Free Democrats, which, having quit the coalition, split into warring factions and essentially self-destructed. The other small, established party, the Democratic Forum (originally a Christian-conservative party) had also suffered major setbacks due to its very public internal debates and splits, but nonetheless managed to contest the election with a market-liberal message, also supported by the rump of the Free Democrats some of whom featured on the Forum's list. Another newcomer, 'Politics Can Be Different' (LMP) was also in the running for the (social) liberal vote. Like Jobbik, this party too used the EP elections as springboard to national politics. Although in 2009 they did not secure any mandates, the party became relatively well known as a new 'greenish' alternative. Politics Can Be Different's profile was less clear than the other parties: it combined environmentalism, as a result of the party's founders coming from the green movement, and a respect for social diversity, but also an anti-globalisation, anti-capitalist and *etatist* rhetoric which was not dissimilar to that of Jobbik (albeit these positions were reached on different ideological grounds).

The main contestants of the elections were thus the Fidesz-Christian Democratic People's Party alliance (with the latter in a barely visible role), certain to win; the weakened Socialist Party, following eight years of incumbency; the extreme right Jobbik, seen as likely to become a significant force in the new parliament; and Politics Can Be Different and the Democratic Forum, both with a somewhat uncertain outlook - particularly the Forum, once the largest force of the 1990 parliament, which this time did not succeed in fielding a national party list for the PR part of the vote (more about the electoral system below).

The campaigns

With a change of government seen as a matter of certainty, and given the permanent campaign of the past several years when Fidesz fought for the resignation of the government and the Socialists for survival, it was difficult for either of the two major parties to come up with new messages in the run up to the elections. Analysts had feared that the campaign would repeat the pattern of 2002 and 2006, both of which were dominated by unrealistic (not to say impossible) pledges from both major parties to maintain Hungary's expensive and inefficient welfare system, and even increase social spending while also cutting taxes. But this was not to be, largely because this time around Fidesz had a far simpler and safer strategy: instead of talking about what it would do once in government, save in the most general and/or somewhat contradictory terms, it focussed on the Socialists' eight years in office, described as incompetent and corrupt. A recurring theme was the charge that the Socialists' incompetence forfeited what was commonly seen as Hungary's leading regional economic position early in the decade, which was in turn portrayed as having been secured by Fidesz's own spell in office. (The Democratic Forum echoed this but also included the 1998-2002 Fidesz government in what they refer to as Hungary's 'lost decade').

Beyond attacking the Socialists' record, which the latter indeed found difficult to defend, Fidesz's absence of specific electoral pledges had the added benefit of not giving the Socialists a chance to contrast policy proposals, and not constraining the party too much once in government. To mention tax policy, a flagship of Fidesz, as an example, Viktor Orban mentioned in a November TV interview that Fidesz would implement a 'one-off, large scale tax cut' in 2010, but details of these plans were never mentioned by Mr Orban, nor were they clarified by leading Fidesz politicians (some of whose statements later contradicted the Orban comment) or the Fidesz manifesto. A clear indication that the 'no specifics' was, from the Fidesz point of view, an effective strategy came when Mihaly Varga, tipped future minister of finance, disclosed in January 2010 that Fidesz planned pension reforms along the lines of the Swedish model, in that pension contributions would be registered in individual pension accounts, rather than in the current pooled system. The Socialists immediately seized upon this 'revelation' claiming that the Fidesz plan would take thousands of Forints out of pensioners' pockets. Not wanting to expose themselves to challenge on policy issues is detectable in Fidesz's, and specifically Viktor Orban's, refusal to participate in televised debates of party leaders, a customary feature of previous elections, and also in the Fidesz manifesto.

In 'The politics of national affairs', the somewhat unclear title under which the Fidesz manifesto was published, Viktor Orban's five-page-long introduction formulated a number of commendable objectives, such as 'an ability for every man to look after his family', or 'honest jobs and honest wages', without any indication of these objectives would be achieved. The manifesto is unusual in that each of the subsequent chapters on various policy areas was published under the authorship of individual Fidesz politicians, which seems to obfuscate the question whether they contain personal opinion or the party's electoral pledges.

The Socialists strategy was largely defensive, trying (and in light of the election result, evidently failing) to persuade the voters that Fidesz's characterisation of the past eight years was false. The party tried to take credit for the Bajnai cabinet's (according to the previously quoted OECD report, relatively successful) fiscal stabilisation efforts – for example, in the form of giant posters appearing in November 2009 with the caption 'We are doing what needs

to be done'. (The Fidesz counter-poster retorted with: 'Do what you need to do - resign!'). The Socialists manifesto, 'Progress, security, democracy', adopted in December 2010 **????** claims that 'we [the party] had successes and failures, but eventually contained the world [economic] crisis'. This message did not seem to convince the electorate, partly because the improved budgetary situation did not translate into detectable improvements in living standards (even though the stable Forint did mean that mortgage payments became more manageable for households), and partly because many blamed the Socialists for the severe impact of the global economic crisis in the first place. The Socialists also tried to respond to Fidesz's negative campaign with some negative campaigning of their own, warning the voters about the consequences of a potentially overwhelming Fidesz victory for the quality of democracy; claiming that Fidesz would re-tailor Hungarian parliamentarism and the constitution in a self-serving, partisan manner. (Fidesz did indeed make it clear that in possession of a large parliamentary majority they would not hesitate to redraw laws of constitutional standing).

In terms of the visual elements of the campaign, Fidesz stuck to safe (if largely meaningless) poster messages such as 'The time is here', or 'The time has come, Hungary', showing a statesman-like Viktor Orban in front of a row of giant Hungarian flags. (Predictably, a common graffiti added: 'for what?'). Politics Can Be Different's posters played on the party's name, showing the photos of ordinary people with the slogan 'We think that Politics Can Be Different'. The Democratic Forum also used many posters showing unknown young people, with the party's name and the words 'Hungarians. Democrats. Independents' in aid of its strategy to position itself as the independent force in Hungarian politics. Most parties used posters showing giant photos of their leading candidates - in Jobbik's case, some donning the black uniform (or something very much like it) of the banned Hungarian Guard.

Somewhat from the sidelines, the smaller parties all commented on, and sought to distance themselves from, the Fidesz-Socialist confrontation, which re-enforced a general anti-politics sentiment in the campaign. The Democratic Forum, as the first page of its manifesto attests, sought to draw attention to what they described as the 'crisis of democracy', under attack by populists on both left and right, and to portray itself as the measured, responsible centrist force. This is clearly a continuation of the Forum's increasingly difficult strategy of keeping equal distance from Fidesz (its erstwhile coalition partner between 1998 and 2002) and the Socialists. The latter clearly did not represent much of a threat at this stage, but the party leadership's opposition to Fidesz had internally divided, exhausted and ultimately fragmented the Forum. In the last couple of years the centrist strategy was complemented by a very pronounced market liberal shift, which included inviting Lajos Bokros, a neo-liberal economist and former minister of finance in the Socialist-Free Democrat (!) coalition of the mid-1990s - widely recognised in expert circles as an excellent crisis manager but also remembered (and not happily) by the voters as initiator of the toughest austerity package in living memory - to lead the party's list. This worked (relatively) well with the message of 'straight talk and competence' in 2009, when, against all odds, the Forum scraped past the electoral threshold in the EP elections. In 2010, however, Mr Bokros (who led the Budapest list, while party leader Ibolya David was the first name on the national list) was apparently too divisive a personality in the national electoral arena. Recurring news of various people expelled from the party constantly drew attention away from the party's programme, and prevented the leadership from focusing on a common theme or message.

Jobbik's campaign is neatly summarised with the main objectives they concisely listed on their posters: '1) Order and police 2) [Former Socialist prime minister] Gyurcsany to prison 3)

Tax the multinationals 4) Europe of nations', signed as 'Jobbik - the new force. Hungary belongs to the Hungarians.' Another giant poster showed metal bars (presumably of a prison cell), with the slogan: 'The people pass judgement: 20 years for 20 years' (i.e., since the 1990 regime change). The anti-system protest rhetoric drew on all the themes one would expect, from hostility to European integration, globalisation, foreign capital and the market, and also included (substituting for the anti-immigrant rhetoric of West European sister parties) anti-Semitism and references to 'Gypsy crime' - the issue many analysts attributed the party's success to at the time of the EP elections. Although the main 'enemy' for Jobbik was the Socialists, the party also attacked Fidesz for its perceived complicity and lack of courage to confront pressing social issues, thus leaving Jobbik as the only party that 'genuinely' stands up for the interests of 'the people' (volk). Jobbik's manifesto, entitled 'Radical change for national self-determination and social justice', also published in English (!), confidently stated on page 1 that 'The more that people become aware of Jobbik's conceptions, the more they end up discovering that they have always been Jobbik supporters, and have simply not realised this fact beforehand.' Presumably in an effort to open up towards mainstream voters and fight of the 'extremist' label, the party also frequently protested that its objectives had been 'misunderstood' or even deliberately distorted by the left-liberal media.

Politics Can Be Different was perhaps the most eclectic of the parties. Its founding members' background in the green movement was detectable in the environmentalism-sustainable development elements of its programme, and there was also emphasis on social inclusion and grassroots participation in a way that was reminiscent of Nordic green and socialist left parties, including a Soft Euroscepticism that mainly fed on the perceived weakness of democracy within the EU. The 228 page long party manifesto, 'The strategy of sustainable future, inclusive society and democratic renewal', identified three immediate reasons for what they described as a loss of public confidence in democracy as a political system: corruption, clientelism and inequality. 'Hungary's democracy has fallen capture to political oligarchs in the past 20 years', states the document - a sentiment most forcefully voiced by Jobbik, but to some extent also the mainstream opposition parties. The party's campaign was mainly about the demonstration of a different political style - one where Politics Can Be Different sought to portray itself as more consultative, in closer contact with its supporters, and altogether more open-minded than its opponents.

Apart from Jobbik, only Politics Can Be Different devoted several pages to the EU in its manifesto, describing it as valuable in many respects, but also 'distant from its citizens, lacking in transparency accountability, and consequently struggling with legitimacy and democracy deficit.' The party called for democratising EU decision making, and both 'strengthening the self-determination of member states' in some respects and at the same time declaring itself ready to participate in further developing 'political integration' in the EU. Jobbik was the only other party that explicitly discussed their position on the EU and European integration in their manifesto - and this, in part, echoed Politics Can Be Different's critique in describing the EU's institutions as 'largely anti-democratic'. But Jobbik's position did not stop at this critique, but rather fundamentally questioned Hungary's relationship with the EU. The party rejected the Lisbon treaty and called for a more decisive, hard representation of the national interest in the EU (building a Europe of nations), combined with a reorientation of foreign policy to the East. While the party thus accepted Hungary's EU membership currently, its manifesto was explicit in stating that this was not to be taken for granted: 'it is our conviction that Hungary's future cannot be imagined within the framework of the EU's current development trajectories. If the Union proceeds in this direction, our motherland must consider leaving the community ...'

The other parties' positions on the EU were less detailed/pronounced (although even Politics Can Be Different or Jobbik failed to make anything of European issues in the campaign). The otherwise clearly pro-EU and pro-integration Socialists - long-standing members of the Party of European Socialists - often mentioned EU funds coming to Hungary and the various infrastructure projects which were started or completed with structural funds under the Socialist government, but did not discuss their vision for Europe or current issues on the EU's agenda. Neither was anything to do with European integration mentioned in their manifesto. The same went for the 95 page long Fidesz manifesto. The document mentioned EU funds and occasionally compared Hungary to other European countries, but the Union itself or its development were not discussed, nor was the European People's Party (of which Fidesz was a member) referred to. Foreign policy as whole was only mentioned in passing, calling for 'a renewal of our alliance with the West, strengthening our relations with America, and ... making our country a decisive player in Central-European cooperation'. The Democratic Forum, a traditionally pro-EU party, was also silent on the issue. In short, despite clear differences among the parties in their attitudes to European integration, Europe left no mark on their campaigns at all.

Results and analysis

As it turned out, the campaigns had not made much of a difference in any respect: the results in the first round on 11 April delivered the expected overwhelming Fidesz victory, the (also predicted) massive blow to the Socialists, and gave Jobbik its big break - perhaps bigger than expected, given that the party secured third place. Over 5 million citizens, representing 64% of the electorate, turned out to vote.

Table 1: The results of the 2010 election in Hungary

Party	Share of list vote, first round (%)	Single member district	Mandates			Total	Share of mandates (%)
			County/ Budapest list	National (compensatory) list			
Fidesz-Christian Democratic People's Party	52,73	173*	87	3	263	68.14	
Socialist Party (MSZP)	19,30	2	28	29	59	15.28	
Jobbik	16,67	0	26	21	47	12.18	
Politics Can Be Different (LMP)	7,48	0	5	11	16	4.15	
Democratic Forum (MDF)	2,67	0	0	0	0	0	
Independent	-	1	-	-	1	0.26	
Other	1.13	-	-	-	-	0	
Total		176	146	64	386	100.00	

*Includes an MP also supported by a minor party.

Source: National Election Office; HVG 1 May 2010, p9.

The Fidesz-Christian Democratic People's Party victory was indeed phenomenal: as Table 1 shows, not only did they receive almost 53% of the vote cast for lists in the PR tier of the electoral system, but also won outright in the first round in 119 of the 176 single member constituencies (which, according to the electoral law, requires that the candidate secures more than 50% of the votes, with at least 50% turnout). Only the remaining, approximately one

third of these seats were to be contested in a second round two weeks later, where the three top candidates remain standing. Usually, the second round is decided by tactical voting and inter-party bargaining between the two rounds to maximise the chances of victory for one candidate on either side of the Left-Right divide – a feature of the electoral system that has reinforced the tendency towards bipolar competition in the Hungarian party system and made genuinely centrist electoral strategies difficult in the long run. This was, however, not the case in the 2010 elections.

The main question that (technically) remained open after the first round was whether Fidesz would secure a two thirds majority in parliament - although even here, the signs were not hard to read. In the vast majority of the 57 single member constituencies that had not been decided the Fidesz candidate came out leading in the first round, with only a handful of local electoral contests where the Socialists at least stood a chance. The Socialist strategy for securing the seats still in the running was to stress the need to stop Fidesz from gaining a two thirds majority, portrayed as a risk too high to take given the sweeping powers this would give any government. To make this claim credible, the Socialists ‘unilaterally’ withdrew four candidates in constituencies where Politics Can Be Different remained standing, instructing their voters to support the latter party’s candidates to minimise the loss of ‘anti-Fidesz’ vote. The hope was clearly that Politics Can Be Different voters would reward this gesture and reciprocate by supporting the Socialist candidates where the former did not stand a chance, which was the case in all the remaining constituencies. The Politics Can Be Different leadership, for its part, did not return the favour – saying, essentially, that they respected the voters who supported them in the first round too much to try to influence their decision or restrict their choice. The still standing Politics Can Be Different candidates thus were not withdrawn anywhere. The Fidesz leadership, comfortable in the knowledge of their already secured future governmental position, confined itself to telling their voters to make sure to turn out in the second round for a final push so that the party could implement wide-scale changes un-encumbered by an opposition capable of blocking or constraining government policy on issues where constitutional change might be pursued.

As Table 1 shows, in the 24 April 2010 second round the results confirmed the Fidesz landslide: the party won in 54 of the still open single member districts, or in all but 3 of the 176 available, with a low turnout of 46,6% (the voters too had evidently decided that with government formation already decided, they need not bother too much). As the leading political weakly pointed out, had the Hungarian electoral system been purely majoritarian, Fidesz-Christian Democratic People’s Party would have ended up with well over 90% of the mandates – that is, practically without opposition. Even in the current mixed system, 263 of the 386 MPs were elected from Fidesz- Christian Democratic People’s Party, giving it a majority of 68%, well over what was needed even for amending the constitution.

Predictably, Fidesz leaders hailed their victory as unprecedented in modern Hungarian electoral history. Indeed, no other party (or party alliance, as in this case) had secured such a landslide, although the 1994-98 Socialist-Free Democrat coalition had an even larger majority, with 209 Socialist and 70 Free Democrat seats in parliament. (The distortion produced by the majoritarian element of the system was illustrated by Fidesz securing over two-thirds of the seats with 53% of the list vote in 2010. The same distortion had previously favoured the Socialists). Politics Can Be Different was also extremely pleased with their results, as was Jobbik; although the latter party evidently would have expected that even more voters would ‘discover’ that they are the party’s supporters.

For the Socialists, the results were disastrous: not since 1990 had the party's support shrunk to such a small share in a national election. In 2006, almost 44% of the vote was cast for the Socialist list: more than half of this support melted away in the past four years. On the other hand, the party slightly upped its results from the 2009 EP elections, when they got 17%, but given the much higher turnout this hardly counted as a significant improvement. Particularly humiliating for this major party of government (the Socialists were in government for 12 of the past 20 years) was the fact that the extreme right finished barely behind it nationally, and in fact in Eastern Hungary the latter emerged as the main contender to Fidesz in single member constituencies. Socialist Party leader Ildiko Lendvai offered her resignation on the night of the election (although, at the time of writing, was staying on in a caretaker capacity until a new leader was elected). The outcome was also a blow to the Democratic Forum: the strongest party of the 1990 election failed to pass the 5% electoral threshold and thus to secure even a single mandate. The party leader Ibolya David immediately resigned. With the already absent Free Democrats and Ms David's party gone, a large chunk of Hungary's recent political history receded into the background, perhaps never to re-appear again.

How to explain the massive swing to the right? A large part of the explanation must be anti-incumbent voting, magnified manifold by both the (by Hungarian standards) extremely long tenure of the left in office and the recession, brought on by the explosive combination of the global economic crisis with a decade of economic populism feeding on bipolar electoral competition. The elections of 2002 and 2006 'taught' both the Socialists and Fidesz the lesson that only with promises of 'painless' minor corrections and maintained social spending it is possible to win - as unless these unsustainable electoral pledges are made, the opponent would make them instead. It appeared that there was no way out of this 'prisoners' dilemma', with the result that competition between the two major parties centred on which one can credibly promise more. After eight years in office, the last year of which was dominated by crisis management, the Socialists had lost the credibility for offering better things to come.

Moreover, the party went into the elections without a 'partisan' prime minister campaigning on their side. Given the Bajnai cabinet's 'technocratic' stance (the prime minister and many of his key members were not members of the Socialist Party, and Mr Bajnai had ruled out staying in politics after the elections), the government had sought to avoid political confrontation as much as possible. By supporting the cabinet in parliament the Socialists paid the price of incumbency without being able to turn governmental status to their advantage. The election result can thus be largely explained with a massive flight of the vote away from the Socialists to whoever appeared to present an alternative. The obvious candidate for this was the Socialist Party's main competitor, Fidesz, but Politics Can Be Different and particularly Jobbik benefited too. The Fidesz strategy aided this in that, by refusing to engage with the Socialists and keeping their campaign essentially free of policy content, it simply avoided saying anything that could potentially put voters off. In other words, Fidesz strategists mainly relied on the Socialists to lose the election, with Fidesz merely promising 'change'.

Jobbik's and Politics Can Be Different's strong performance is, however, worth commenting on further. As 'new' parties not only were they excellently positioned for picking up the anti-politics/anti-establishment vote (and, given the wide-spread disgust of the common [wo]man with the tug-of-war between the major established parties, there was a lot of this available), but they also each found, and enlarged, an available niche. For Politics Can Be Different, the liberal niche was vacated by the self-inflicted demise of the Free Democrats, who had used up their electoral capital in office as minority coalition partner, only to quit the coalition too late

and then fall apart. To some extent, Jobbik benefited from an opening on the extreme right, as Fidesz's deliberate blandness opened up their right wing flank to challenge. Moreover, both Politics Can Be Different and Jobbik were able to benefit from a generational divide in Hungarian politics. The Socialists had been unable to attract voters from the younger age cohorts, and in the last decade Fidesz's base had increasingly aged too. Jobbik and Politics Can Be Different were both disproportionately popular among young people, and complemented each other in attracting this age cohort: Politics Can Be Different did very well in urban areas and especially Budapest (as the Free Democrats used too) whereas Jobbik's support was high in the countryside and especially economically depressed Eastern Hungary.

Conclusions and future prospects

Several features differentiate the 2010 elections from earlier ones, which had all, since 1998, been bi-polar contests between two relatively evenly matched opponents - the Socialists on the left and Fidesz on the right - with a number of much smaller parties in the wings.

First, in 2010 the outcome of the elections was not at all in doubt given that Fidesz's popular support dwarfed that of all other parties, including the governing Socialists. Consequently, it was not government formation that was at stake, but rather, for Fidesz, securing a qualified majority and for the Socialists survival.

Second, the extreme right Jobbik did exceptionally well - better than any new party ever in Hungary's post-communist history. Jobbik's 17% combined with Fidesz' 53% shows that the overwhelming majority of Hungarian voters turned away from the left/liberal bloc. In other words, a fundamental shift to the right took place in Hungarian politics. Nowhere was this more clearly observable than in the counties East of the Danube, where the Socialists' support had contracted so drastically as to allow Jobbik to gain on them and attain the position of the second strongest party.

Third, two 'old' parties, the Democratic Forum and the Free Democrats, disintegrated and left the liberal pole of the electoral field open - an absence that at least one new party, Politics Can Be Different, capitalised on, although it is unclear whether this party's eclectic message indeed incorporated enough liberal elements to keep the (in any case wavering) support of this camp of voters in the long run.

Fourth, both newcomers - Jobbik and Politics Can Be Different - were explicitly non-aligned in the sense that (at least in public) so far both refused involvement in, and association of any kind with, the conflict between the 'old parties' and the 'old politics' they claimed that these parties represented.

What was clear was that the 2010 elections produced a political landscape that was barely recognisable to long-term observers of Hungarian politics. There are a number of important questions, currently wide open, that are likely to determine future events for many years to come:

First, will the electoral system stay the same? This is also to ask: will the new parliamentary opposition have a say? Fidesz is a strong, highly centralised party with a super-majority in Parliament that will allow it to change laws of constitutional standing, including the electoral system or party financing legislation (the latter clearly needs changing as the current system

lends itself to abuse). Under the current rules, exercising even basic rights of parliamentary opposition, such as calling for plenary debates or establishing committees of inquiry, would require the support of all three opposition parties - which is unlikely to materialise given the need in this case for Politics Can Be Different and the Socialists to co-operate with Jobbik. The Socialists alone are unable to propose amendments as the plenary discussion of these is dependent on one third support in the committees, which the party does not command (there is an indication that Fidesz might grant one third to the opposition in the committees). In other words, currently it is only Fidesz's self-restraint that would prevent a partisan amendment of, for instance, the electoral system (for example, increasing the majoritarian element) or the constitution (for example, strengthening the office of the President vis-à-vis parliament, or changing rules for his/her nomination and appointment). Mr Orban said in his victory speech that the opposition will receive 'elegant' treatment, but the 1998-2002 Fidesz government's record is not encouraging in this respect.

Second, will the Socialists recover or will Hungary repeat the Polish scenario, leaving the Left of the party system wide open? The party is currently in the midst of trying to find new leadership and direction, although the shellshock of the elections is clearly still very strongly felt, and the party will need to prepare for a highly constrained oppositional role. An outright split has so far been avoided, but it is clear that various internal factions are struggling for domination, and the outcome might be to bring back tried and tested faces as a compromise - who, however, are probably not suitable for driving forward the drastic renewal the Socialists need to stand a chance in four years' time.

Is there any chance of a return of bipolar politics in the longer term future? Considerable further changes in the party system are reasonable to expect, particularly as possible future alignments among the four (five) parties (Fidesz-Christian Democratic People's Party, the Socialist Party, Jobbik and Politics Can Be Different) can be on the cards. In principle, each may remain separate, standing for a completely different ideological field, but past experience shows that smaller parties faced with a choice between either gravitating towards a large patron or carving out an independent electoral existence tend to opt for the former. Conversely, large parties tended to seek either to co-opt or otherwise accommodate ideologically compatible small rivals (see the Christian Democratic People's Party), or squeeze them out of electoral competition (as it happened with the Hungarian Democratic Forum). In this election, both protest parties took away far more votes from the governing Socialists than Fidesz, but in the long run Fidesz could become their target - this is particularly the case as Jobbik flanks Fidesz on the extreme right. Soon it will be Fidesz damaged by the anti-incumbency bias, as voters find that the unrealistically high expectations many had about rapidly improving living standards under a new government cannot be met. Much depends on how Fidesz might try to counter this, but one scenario is that the pendulum swings back, with the left regaining some of its lost support, provided that the Socialists manage to rebuild their party in the meantime. Another scenario is however for Jobbik (and to a lesser extent, Politics Can Be Different if they succeed in clarifying their electoral profile) to gain even more ground as the only remaining untested alternative.

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