



BULLETIN

No. 53 (129) • April 8, 2010 • © PISM

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Parliamentary Elections in Hungary: Implications for Foreign Policy

by Rafał Morawiec

The definite favourite in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Hungary is former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's right-wing FIDESZ, who is likely to head a new single-party government. It is likely that after eight years of rule by the Socialists, a victory for the right-wing party will bring major changes to Hungary's foreign policy. Most of them should have a positive effect on prospects for achievement of Poland's main foreign policy goals.

Forecasts. Opinion polls carried out just before the first round of elections (11 April 2010) show that FIDESZ has a chance not only of gaining a majority in the (unicameral) parliament enabling it to form a government on its own, but also to take up two thirds of seats in the parliament, which would give it a constitutional majority. Apart from Orbán's party, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP), which has been in power since 2002, and the radical right-wing Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), will cross the five-percent threshold (both parties have support of 15–18%). Two parties which played a part in government after 1990 will probably not get into parliament: The Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz). The leader of FIDESZ has said that regardless of his party's results in the elections he will reject the option of forming a coalition—even if it is the only way of getting a constitutional majority.

Situation Prior to the Elections. There are two fundamental reasons why the Right has such a lead. The first is the severe economic crisis, with which Hungary has been struggling since the beginning of the decade, being mostly due to the policies of consecutive governments in Hungary (including the government led by Orbán from 1998–2002). The situation was made worse by the global economic crisis, which affected Hungary considerably more than other Central European countries. It led to the MSzP having to make extensive cuts in public spending, contributing further to the fall in popularity of his party, which had been getting worse for some time.

The original cause was the revelation short after election victory by socialists of statements made by the then Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, who admitted that before the election he purposefully concealed the true condition of the country's economy. The result of this event was immediate, and was a steady drop in popularity of the government formed with the SzDSz. This support could not be recovered, leading the coalition to collapse in 2008 and to establishment of a minority MSzP government (headed by Gordon Bajnai since March 2009). A severe crisis of confidence in the ruling socialists, whom a large portion of the public accuses of being ineffective in combating the crisis, is the second reason for the current high level of support enjoyed by the Right.

In Jobbik's case this is building of support on the basis of xenophobic slogans directed towards voters facing financial difficulties (including people who formerly voted for the MSzP). A characteristic feature of this party is open expression of the need to re-annex at least some of the areas inhabited by a Hungarian minority in neighbouring states.

Implications for Foreign Policy. Since the beginning of the nineties the objectives and areas of Hungarian foreign policy have been defined by three priorities: integration with European and Transatlantic structures, striving for good relations with neighbours and regional cooperation and the so-called National Policy, which should be understood to mean (put somewhat simply) protection of the interests of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries. With respect to these defined foreign policy priorities there is a consensus in Hungary that has not been shaken by the varying levels of importance that the individual parties ruling from 1990 onwards attached to each of them.

The socialists, in power for the last eight years, have had a sceptical approach to development of V4 cooperation and relations with Poland. Under their rule Hungary moved in the direction of “soft Atlantism,” gaining a sense of perspective towards US policies. At the same time they highlighted that they are decidedly in favor of extending integration within the EU, and among other things attacked Poland for its position on the issue. It is true that consecutive governments of which the MSzP has been part claimed that they are in favour of forming a common EU energy policy, but they have perceived increasing energy security—as opposed to the Polish government—in diversification of transmission routes while not seeing the need for varying sources of supply. In practice this has meant assent to Russia’s implementation of plans to expand into EU markets. In contrast to right-wing governments, the socialists have shown less determination in realization of the goals of the National Policy.

An analysis of the manifesto and statements made by leading FIDESZ politicians shows that there will be major changes in Hungarian foreign policy if that party gets into power.

Above all a rise in the importance of the National Policy objectives can be expected, which could lead to tensions arising with countries with Hungarian minorities, in particular with Slovakia, more frequently than up to now. This will also mean that relations with those countries will be defined by their treatment of that minority, as well as promotion of minority rights in the EU forum, including collective rights.

The potentially negative impact of this element of the new government’s foreign policy on relations with neighbours will neutralize efforts to improve regional cooperation, both within the V4 and the EU’s so-called Danube strategy. In the FIDESZ plans both ventures are to play a vital role in promotion of Hungarian interests in the EU. The V4 is also intended to fulfil the role of a plane for agreeing interests in relations with Russia, while proposals have been made for significant transformation on both the bilateral, and the multilateral plane.

For this reason Orbán’s government will be trying to create permanent foundations for EU policy towards Russia, of which one element would be diversification of sources of supplies of energy raw materials, treated as principle for a pan-European energy security system. Among FIDESZ’s foreign policy priorities is also increased activity aimed at implementing the EU Nabucco project, negatively assessing at the same time the rival South Stream project, which “is weakening the possibility for diversification and increasing one-sided dependence of Hungary on Russia.”

Most probably there will be changes to the approach to transatlantic relations, which—in the opinion of FIDESZ politicians—should have priority in Hungarian foreign and security policy. The new government will also try to improve relations between the EU and NATO, and Hungary’s presidency of the EU, which will be during the first half of 2011, is to be an opportunity to realize those plans. Among the most important priorities will be pushing the Western Balkans’ European aspirations and improving the EU’s relations with the countries in the Eastern Partnership program, especially with Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus.

Implications for Poland. The changes that are likely to take place in Hungary’s foreign policy will mean that its objectives will be much more similar to Poland’s main foreign policy objectives than they have been up to now. The effect of this factor on mutual relations could strengthen the will declared by the FIDESZ leader for closer cooperation with Poland as Hungary’s main partner in the region. If changes in Czech foreign policy unfavourable from Poland’s point of view were to come about as a result of the election scheduled for the end of May in the Czech Republic, a resumption of Polish-Hungarian relations could become the driving force for regional cooperation, which Polish-Czech relations have done until now. Poland should take steps however to prevent two rival camps forming within the V4 (Czech Republic–Slovakia and Poland–Hungary), as this would have an adverse effect on the chances for realization of Polish interests in Central Europe and the entire EU.