



BULLETIN

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Déjà Vu in Hungary: Another Four Years for Orbán

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The right-wing Fidesz has for the second time in a row won the parliamentary elections in Hungary. This was the result of skilful voter-information policy as well as the weakness of the opposition and the personal popularity of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. His victory will allow for further consolidation of power in the country and a continuation of its pragmatic foreign policy. For Poland, this means maintaining the current good dynamics of the V4, but is a challenge for both the European and eastern dimensions.

The undisputed winner of the parliamentary elections of 6 April was Fidesz (44.5%, 133 seats). The governing movement had won in Hungary in the past, but this time Viktor Orbán's party—despite a worse result than in 2010 (53%)—in a historical first, again has a chance to reach a constitutional majority (the votes from two single-member districts are yet being counted). The opposition saw its results improve from four years ago—the left-liberal coalition Change of the Government 2014 won 26%, or 38 seats, and the nationalist Jobbik took 20.6%, or 23 seats—but their roles in the National Assembly will be as marginal as before. The Green party, LMP (5.3%, 5 seats), also entered parliament. The election was conducted under a new electoral law that included such changes as the elimination of second-round voting, a reduction in the number of MPs from 386 to 199, granted voting rights to Hungarians living abroad, and introduced a “victorious compensation” mechanism, which supports the strongest party.

The Phenomenon of Fidesz. Despite the favourable law and loss of more than 700,000 supporters, the result for Orbán's party still should be regarded as unique in the European Union. One can point out at least five factors to explain the phenomenon.

First, Fidesz has built an efficient mechanism for the promotion of its activities. To achieve this, the party engaged public media (which turned out to be unhelpful to the country's position in the Press Freedom Index, where Hungary over four years had fallen by 31 places) and drew close to government newspapers, entrepreneurs, think tanks and civil society organisations. As a result, an effective system of communication was developed to explain and promote Fidesz's steps and respond to its critics.

Second, the government, which fell into dispute with external actors, avoided confrontation in the country, trying to satisfy the widest possible social groups. For example, it raised the minimum wage, reduced electricity prices and introduced a flat tax that helped top earners. In social policies, it took pro-family steps, while tolerating partnerships between persons of the same sex and maintaining a liberal abortion law. Largely thanks to this strategy, no strong anti-Fidesz movement was established.

Third, Fidesz managed to create the impression that it is the only party capable of effectively fighting for the country's national interest. The rhetoric of national pride and social mobilization helped to stop a decline in support from elites from the time of the left-wing government, and met the expectations of Hungary's rather conservative society, including those living beyond the country's borders, 95% of whom voted for Fidesz.

Fourth, also important was the charisma and popularity of Orbán, who is the second after the president with the biggest social trust (45% support). The model he has developed—as a strong leader, one who creates positive visions for the future and takes personal responsibility for the actions of his government—has been accepted by a large number of Hungarians.

Fifth, Fidesz's victory was possible because of the weakness of the opposition, which was either mired in personal or ideological disputes (left), or for a long time could not get out of their niche (Jobbik).

The Marginalised Opposition. Second place went to the left-liberal coalition, Change of Government 2014, which consists of five parties, with the largest being the Hungarian Socialist Party. Its leader, Attila Mesterházy, succeeded in maintaining the party's unity after its 2010 electoral defeat and introduced generational changes in leadership. Though due to the difficulties of formulating a common programme and the ambitions of other protagonists, former prime ministers Gordon Bajnai and Ferenc Gyurcsány, faith in Mesterházy's leadership and in the coalition's durability have from the beginning seemed limited. Most of their demands were the antithesis of Fidesz proposals, a fact that intensified the impression that the only bond linking the coalition was dislike of Orbán. In the short term, one should thus expect further reshuffling, which will rather only deepen the chaos. The left today does not have enough personal, structural or media potential to challenge Orbán's party.

Also faring well was Jobbik, which for the first time crossed the 20% threshold of support; this is the only party whose popularity has been constantly growing since 2006. This time, the party's leaders limited anti-EU, anti-Roma and anti-Semitic rhetoric, building a narrative based on government criticism and social themes rarely raised before (e.g., the problems of retirees). This strategy was aimed at expanding Jobbik's hermetic group of voters, which included mostly residents of poorer eastern counties and young intelligentsia. The image of Jobbik as a vigorous young movement of modern nationalism, sensitive to social issues and skilled with new media, is troublesome for Fidesz, as the crisis in the left may mean those dissatisfied with Orbán will begin gathering around this party. To avoid this, Fidesz will probably—as in the last term—join some of the radical demands to its own agenda (e.g., banking tax).

The Big Continuation. Although Fidesz leaders avoided making clear statements regarding their plans for the future, of crucial importance may be the completion of the consolidation of power. In four years, Orbán's party strengthened its control of the most important political and economic institutions and media, and began centralisation and re-nationalisation of the country's strategic areas. After increasing central decision-making, e.g., in education, healthcare and energy, this trend will also include other sectors of the state and economy. This will be facilitated by the constitutional majority; it will allow easier modifications of the 2012 constitution, which has already been amended four times and, due to its hasty adoption, requires further changes. In addition, it is expected that Fidesz, which passed most of the controversial bills in the previous term, will try to build its popularity on the efficient administration of the country. Although limitation of the reform effort may result in stagnation of the ruling party, it will also reduce social fatigue with changes and improve Hungary's relationships with its foreign partners. The latter is especially important for the economy. The government has led a consolidation of fiscal policy so that the budget deficit fell in 2013 to below 3% of GDP, and has slightly decreased the level of public debt (from 82% to 79% of GDP), but the problem is still the lack of prospects for stable growth and the need for long-term decline in unemployment. Improvement of the investment climate could be thus helpful to sort out these problems.

Fidesz will probably also continue its current foreign policy of double-talk in the EU (eurosceptic rhetoric in the country while staying in the mainstream in Brussels), maintaining distance to the U.S., and opening wide to the east. Recent Orbán comments suggest that Hungary can more actively engage in cooperation with Western institutions. However, due to internal reasons (increasing social disillusionment with the EU and competition with Jobbik for conservative voters), a factual change in the agenda is unlikely. Much also depends on what model of decision-making will be developed by the new cabinet. So far, the directions of foreign activity were determined by the prime minister's closest circle, while the MFA only supported their implementation, explained the strategy to external partners, and softened the country's image in the West. With the expected departure of Foreign Minister János Martonyi, his successor could be another moderate career diplomat (e.g., ambassador János Csák), which would mean a continuation of both pattern and policy. A nomination for someone from Orbán's political circle, e.g., Péter Szijjártó, may suggest a more confrontational turn and more active attempts to search for allies in the east. Regardless of the international and domestic backgrounds, the priority remains on concerns for the Hungarian diaspora from neighbouring countries as well as cooperation with the V4.

Recommendations for Poland. For Poland, Fidesz's victory means maintaining the current good dynamics of the V4, but it is a challenge for both the European and eastern dimensions.

Poland should encourage Hungary, which so far has not eagerly participated in discussions about EU reform, to take more responsibility for the future of the Union. The first step would be to strengthen the position of Fidesz in the European People's Party, for example, by restoring Orbán to the position of vice-president. Engaging Hungary in European affairs would neutralise the eurosceptic rhetoric and reduce conflicts with external actors.

Also, the coordination of activities in the post-Soviet region should be built up. Warsaw should be interested in developing a unified position on sanctions against Russia and NATO's response to Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. Although Budapest has declared its "impartiality" on Russia's annexation of Crimea, it is in the Polish interest to take on policy initiatives along with Hungary (for instance visits by high officials from both countries to Ukraine) as well as persuade the Hungarian partners to join in efforts to accelerate the EU's energy diversification projects. To facilitate the latter, Warsaw may attempt to create in Hungary and other V4 countries support for the so called six pillars of the new energy union, proposed by Poland in March.