

Time Is Running out for Hungarian Democracy

12. April 2018 by [Milena Horvath](#)

The results of the general election in Hungary, held on 8 April 2018, showed a devastating picture of the state of Hungarian democracy. For non-Hungarians, in order to grasp the election outcome, it is essential to understand the background of current Hungarian politics and the nature and history of the parties and people that had an impact on the election results.

Despite the general dissatisfaction of the majority of the Hungarian population, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have been ruling since 2010. After winning the 2010 election with a two-thirds majority of votes, Fidesz, as the only governing party, implemented a [number of constitutional and electoral changes](#) which enabled them to centralise power. The new constitution allowed the implementation of legislation with a two-thirds majority, which under the circumstances enabled Fidesz to place its supporters in different political institutions and positions with the intention to build a legal cover for their policies. This way, Fidesz now can elect the Hungarian President, the Supreme Court chief justices, Constitutional Court jurists and ombudsmen.

The road to the 2018 election

Placing family members and political friends into leading positions or favouring them has become standard practice. For instance, whenever there is a call for tender, the winning company seems to be somehow always related to Fidesz. The most famous example is that of Orbán's son-in-law István Tiborcz: in spite of the fact that the public lighting provided by his company (Elios) does not function properly, Tiborcz has continued to win many more of the State and EU funded tenders.

[Propaganda](#) has clearly been the most important tool of the Fidesz government. In order to manipulate Hungarian citizens into believing that EU membership is not beneficial for them and that the Union is responsible for just about every internal problem the country is facing, the 'Let's stop Brussels national consultation' was launched in 2017. By turning citizens against the Union, the Hungarian government made itself look stronger and more powerful in its country. It is also important to note that not every Hungarian citizen appreciates the significant amount of financial support Hungary has received from the EU, because most of this money has been used for corruption purposes by Hungarian politicians instead of being used for its original aim. The most recent scandal is related to the use of EU funds as well: The [FBI](#) has been conducting an investigation on Orbán who is suspected to be involved with powerful Arab investors. To be more specific, 1300 billion forints (the Hungarian currency) from EU funding have 'disappeared', apparently to be re-invested into state projects by Arab investors.

The European Union, however, is not Orbán's only enemy. Further imaginary enemies include the Hungarian born US billionaire and businessman George Soros and the refugees. The battle against Soros, more specifically against the [Central European University \(CEU\)](#) funded by him, started in 2017. The CEU is the only university in the area which gives degrees fully accredited in Hungary and in the United States. By changing one of the passages of the Education Bill, the Hungarian government intends to shut down the university; taking away the opportunity to study at a university which meets European standards from thousands of students. More recently Soros has been accused of conspiracy related to the migrant issue. According to the government party a so called Soros Plan exists, which is aimed at letting 1 000 000 refugees every year enter Europe without setting any limit. Considering the fact that it was thanks to the Soros foundation, that Orbán himself had the chance to study in Oxford, England, for half a year, his battle against Soros is rather grotesque, to say the least.

As for refugees, they have been demonised and described as terrorists who want to kidnap Hungarian women and children and steal Hungarian jobs. Also, the terms of 'migrant' and 'refugee' have been mixed up and are often misunderstood. As a consequence of being constantly exposed to this propaganda against certain groups or people, many Hungarians have come to believe that all of this is true or are, at least, uncertain about what to think and whom to trust.

Due to the high level of corruption and continuing damage to democracy, a decline of nearly every area of public life can be noticed. While the government was busy dealing with football or devising propaganda, more significant issues such as health care, education, unemployment, pension systems etc. were neglected. As a consequence, people see no future for themselves in Hungary, causing a constantly growing exodus of people.

Fidesz and the opposition

Although, there were a number of parties to choose from on the ballot papers, in reality not many of them were serious opponents for Fidesz. In fact, the government party did not even bother to publish an official programme. Fidesz in their election campaign just continued to use the proven propaganda against refugees, Soros and the European Union instead. Having a number of circa 2 000 000 people as their permanent supporters, Fidesz as already in previous elections, used several methods to increase votes, For example, Transborder Hungarians living in Transylvania (which today belongs to Romania) were given the right to vote, even though they do not have a permanent residence in Hungary and some of them might have never been to Hungary at all. As they got this privilege from Fidesz, it is obvious whom they support when it comes to elections. This resulted in mixed responses by people in Hungary: many believed this decision to be unfair especially regarding those Hungarians who were born and have lived in Hungary but moved abroad in order to find work or conduct their studies. Apparently these people deserve fewer rights in terms of voting from abroad. While Transylvanians had a postal vote, Hungarians living abroad were required to register prior to the elections, then had to travel to specific cities on Election Day and submit their votes in person at consulates or embassies to be able to make a decision about their own country and future. More recently, it has been discovered that the population of some Hungarian villages, situated close the Ukrainian border had suddenly drastically increased. Allegedly 50-100 Ukrainian citizens (who, despite of not being Hungarian born and not speaking the language got the Hungarian citizenship, pension and voting rights in Hungary) were supposed to live in a single house, though no locals had ever witnessed their existence.

Jobbik

Taking into account previous opinion polls and the general dissatisfaction of people, Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom (Movement for a Better Hungary) and its candidate for Prime Minister, Gábor Vona, seemed to be the most popular choice next to Fidesz and Orbán. Regrettably, Jobbik is a far right wing party, but at least they managed to present a list of twelve points explaining clearly what they wanted to do in case they got elected. As all the proposed provisions, which included impeachment procedures against former politicians, the creation of a real democracy with independent institutions, a modern education system, a just pension system, reducing emigration while providing a worthy/rightful youth and family policy, the establishment of a border guard system and the refusal of the refuge quota system. Even the importance of a strong Europe, a European wage union and rightful working conditions were outlined.

The strategy and development of Jobbik is interesting. Whilst building a fence at the Hungarian border had originally been Vona's idea which was taken up by Fidesz, about a year ago Vona announced his aim to turn Jobbik into a people's party, refusing radical views. In order to prove the change of his party, he met with several liberal intellectuals and

participated in debates as well. As the proposed provisions seemed to be reasonable to the majority, Jobbik seemed to have good prospects for electoral success.

MSZP and DK

The former Hungarian Prime Minister belonging to the Hungarian Socialist Party, MSZP, Ferenc Gyurcsány, had lost his credibility after the 2006 elections when the audio recording of his private 'Öszöd speech' was made public. In this speech, he admitted that he and his party were constantly lying to the public. If Gyurcsány had resigned from his position right after this scandal, the 2/3 majority win of Fidesz in 2010 could have been avoided. Although Gyurcsány left MSZP and established the social liberal DK (Democratic Coalition), he remains the greatest obstacle for co-operation with other parties and is not taken seriously by the voters. Furthermore, Gyurcsány and Orbán are a bit like a married couple; they do exist together and none of them can exist without one and another. Probably, that is why other parties avoided cooperating with Gyurcsány. It should also be noted that Gyurcsány with DK tried his best to ruin his former party and integrated his supporters into the DK.

Before Fidesz took the power again in 2010, MSZP had been the ruling party for eight years and was blatantly unable to tackle any of the issues the country still had to cope with. Originally in 2018, MSZP nominated László Botka - the popular mayor of the city of Szeged - as its candidate for prime minister. Botka had made it clear that he would have never cooperated with DK or Gyurcsány. According to him, Gyurcsány was responsible for everything that happened before 2010. Despite the fact that Botka realised that the high presence of Fidesz supporters (in his own party) constantly contributed to keeping the government party in power, his plan of reforming the socialist party failed. Shortly after, Botka was sacked and MSZP made some sort of alliance with Gyurcsány. Though DK preserved its own party list, they cooperated with MSZP in terms of assigning single-member constituencies. Botka had to hand in his resignation, in which he stated that it was not possible to change the regime with such a divided democratic opposition and sadly with socialist party members that would have rather lived with the regime, instead of changing it for the better. As a consequence, MSZP had to get a new candidate called Gergely Karácsony from another party, Párbeszéd Magyarorszáért (Dialogue for Hungary).

LMP, Momentum and others

Further options included the Green LMP (Politics Can Be Different) party represented by Bernadett Szél and the newest centrist party, Momentum. Much potential was seen in András Fekete-Győr and in his youth party Momentum that led the successful NOLimpia campaign against hosting the 2024 Olympic Games in Budapest.

The oppositional parties actually had come to an agreement to withdraw some of their candidates for each other's sake and call their voters to vote for the party with the best chances and candidate instead. In other words, the opponent parties, movements such as the Közös Ország Mozgalom (Country for All Movement), taktikaiszavazas.hu, kireszavazzunk.hu and some intellectuals called their supporters for a tactical vote. Prior to the election even the possibility of an unlikely coalition between Jobbik and LMP was talked about. If the two of them had a majority in the parliament or if the left wing Együtt had a majority, a technical coalition would have been possible. In this case, the electorate system could have been changed, the chief prosecutor could have been dismissed and at the end a new election could have been held.

Was it possible to replace Fidesz? A 'guide' on how Hungarians voted or should have voted in 2018

All in all as neither of the opponents looked like an ideal choice, people who wished to replace the government party voted for maybe not the party most appealing to them but for the party with the best chances to win. In the weeks before the election, it became clear that the 2018 election had to be based on tactics. In order to achieve change, voters could not afford to let the votes be spread among many different parties while Fidesz still would win the majority of the votes, as happened before in 2014 at the previous general election. The idea was to convince people to give their votes to the same oppositional party/candidate, even if it meant oppositional voters had to modify their individual political interests and preferences. In other words, compromises had to be made for the sake of a regime change.

Election results and post-election scenarios

Besides the high turn-out of almost 70%, Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz KDMP getting 48,9% of the votes, far ahead of their opponents. The further results were as follows: Jobbik – 19,3%, MSZP Párbeszéd – 12,3%, LMP – 6,9%, DK – 5,5%, Együtt (Together) – 0,6%.

After the announcement of the 2/3 majority win of Fidesz, nobody really knows exactly what will happen. Only one thing is certain: Hungary is drifting further away from the European values towards becoming a Eurosceptic and populist Russia-friendly illiberal undemocratic State. The results of the election held on 8 April surprised and shocked many people. However, even though [in theory the same conditions were applied](#) to all candidates, the electoral competition could not be considered to be equal or fair at all, especially if we have a look at the events during the election campaign since February 2018. Besides having a better financial basis, Fidesz had more possibilities to spread their ideas. Furthermore, the majority of the TV channels, newspapers and radio stations are owned by oligarchs close to the government. Government control over public news and fines for independent, private broadcasters is also common practice, which is a serious threat to the freedom of speech and expression, not to mention the constant use of propaganda against the earlier mentioned imaginary enemies, all of which has been financed by the government itself. Orbán's campaign of hatred especially reached and convinced most people living in the countryside, those who struggle the most to make ends meet day by day. The lack of knowledge, education and the high rate of unemployment and poverty have contributed to the growth of support for Fidesz. Poor people could easily be convinced that their jobs would be taken away by migrants, even though, refugees mostly want to use Hungary only as a passage to Western Europe and do not have the intention to stay. Although the government party has been constantly avoiding to deal with the high number of people leaving the country, the most frequently googled word right after the election results turned out to be 'emigration'. This characterises quite well the options of Hungarian citizens.

Even Orbán himself admitted the consequences of re-electing him in his [speech on 15th March](#), which had a crucial importance as on this day all Hungarians commemorate the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848. Orbán stated that he would take revenge on everyone who voted against him. Additionally, he made it clear that everyone can expect to be held accountable politically, morally and legally. The so called Stop Soros Bill will probably be implemented soon, aiming to shut down all NGOs and also all organisations that promote and protect the rights of migrants.

In the meantime, some of the candidates, like Jobbik leader Vona (who prior to the election promised to resign in case of a defeat), the presidency of MSZP and the co-president of LMP, Ákos Hadrázy, have already submitted their resignation, while Gergely Karácsony decided to give back his mandate to continue working as the mayor of Zugló.

Orbán's victory strengthens the already very powerful European far right parties and populist movements. The outcome of the Hungarian election has made it obvious that if the European Union wants to tackle and get over the identity crisis caused by its interior populist leaders, it has to understand the reasons of this phenomenon. Also, the growing tension between western and eastern Europe needs to be relieved.

The role and responsibility of the EU

Over the last years we have seen everywhere in Europe that the trust in the European Union has been decreasing drastically. The 'best' proof of this was the Brexit referendum, where the majority of the UK citizens decided to quit the Union. In the case of Hungary, citizens have been manipulated by the government's propaganda, mainly on the refugee crisis as Orbán knew quite well that the majority of Hungarian citizens were not willing to accept the refugee quota scheme introduced by the EU. According to public opinion, the so called big powers should end the war in Syria and in other affected areas, because it was their economic interest that started the conflict in the first place. Moreover, Hungarian people are very reluctant to accept and integrate refugees from such a different culture, especially considering the fact that Hungarian society has been more closed and homogeneous than western EU Member States. Besides, they feel that the economy and infrastructure of Hungary would not be capable of taking such a great number of people. It is also important to mention that 150 years of Ottoman ruling and culture in Hungary has left deep traces in people's collective memory and has made them suspicious towards Muslim culture.

Despite the opposition of certain groups of people, the rest of the public expected more support from the EU against Orbán's politics, which has harmed the fundamental rights of Hungarian citizens, ruined the health care and education systems, caused inequalities and increased emigration. EU supporters tend to have the feeling that they have been left behind by the Union and no matter what Orbán or the Fidesz party does, no one will intervene anytime soon on their behalf.

If the EU wants to stick to the implementation of the quota system for refugees, it should also try to understand and listen to the opposition of Hungary and other Member States not only in the refugee question but on other issues as well. The different historical and social backgrounds of EU Member States have to be taken into consideration as well as different views on foreign and security policy and on immigration, bureaucracy, (the use of) EU funds etc. Moreover, the EU must care more about its small, less powerful Member States and conduct serious actions to prevent the increase of the number of the adherents of illiberalism and potential dictators like Orbán. In other words, EU representatives and institutions must get closer to EU citizens, understand their diversity and problems and come to a compromise that benefits each and every one of us in order to keep the Union alive. Allowing that in certain EU Member States people suffer under corrupt, populist regimes is unfair and is clearly against the values and long term goals of the European Union.

As the Luxembourg's Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn described it so adequately, Fidesz is like a tumour that has to be confidently removed by the European Union itself. According to him, the EU has two choices in the case of dealing with Orbán. It can let Orbán dominate and keep ruining a country full of potential while at the same time sacrificing ordinary people or it can finally intervene and stand up for human rights, European values and, more importantly, for the interests and rights of Hungarian citizens. In my opinion, there is a third option: excluding Hungary from the EU, which would affect not only young Hungarians but everyone who has been already working abroad in other EU Member States. I believe, a separation from the European Union would result in Hungary's isolation from the rest of the (civilised) world.

So, taking into account all the facts, several questions need to be answered urgently. Probably the most important questions are: what exactly are the European Union's plans with Hungary? How long does the rest of the Union let Orbán do whatever he wants? Is it in their interest? Is Hungary likely to be kicked out of the EU in the end? What will then happen to those hundreds of thousands of Hungarians living and working abroad?

The European Union must decide how to act now, before it is too late for Hungary and for the Union.