András Szakács

A third Hungary

The concept of modern party competition was formulated so that ideologies could compare their strengths. If one was in power, the other had to keep in mind that the tides will one day turn. However today, parties that become the minority in elections are reluctant to accept their position as the opposition. In many cases they retreat from the system. Instead of taking up the position of government opposition, they opt to choose a certain “system opposition.”

Elections in Hungary today do not pacify public life, while polarization is ever growing. Though the case of the Netherlands could be an example on how to successfully deal with this situation, there are several important differences. On the one hand, the pillarization of society (meaning parallel institutional structures or “pillars” formulate along the different socio-cultural attributions, religious, minority and linguistic fault-lines, where the parties integrate,) is not on the same level in the two countries. As Ádám Paár has previously pointed out, it is also a significant difference that up until the 1970s, the dynamics of Dutch politics were not focused around political ideologies, but differences in religion.

Polarization in Hungary is generated by party actors. For example, when rewriting the constitution, the governing party Fidesz, declared that the Hungarian Socialist Party seated in the Parliament, the successor of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and one of the largest opposition forces remains subject to the anti-democratic burden of the communist era. During the third Orbán government, the issue of the investigation of the independent Ökotárs Foundation and its civic partner organizations that are funded by international grants also became symbolic. In the last few months, government and party actors have pronounced István Pukli, a leading figure of the student-teacher protests a Bolshevik agent, while Prime Minister Viktor Orbán compared the opposition movements of today to that of 1919 aiming to overthrow democratic conditions.

The situation is further aggravated as opposition parties recurrently state that the primary objective of the opposition in the event of an electoral win is to restore conditions preceding 2010. This is also a major polarizing factor, similarly divisive as Fidesz-KDNP’s current politics, since society does not consider the system before 2010 an alternative to that of today. Such promises are counter productive; voters can not be motivated by them.
With this message, left wing and liberal opposition parties broadcast towards society that the period between the second and third Orbán government is a “mistake”, a short period of time where Hungarian history temporarily lost its bearings. With this, these political communities communicate the same idea as Fidesz-KDNP, who render the period of Hungarian communism irrelevant to Hungarian history. For the government parties, time stops in 1944, then restarts in 1990 and even then, only partly. Viktor Orbán himself declared that the years between 1989 and 2010 – including his own first government – were in fact a post-communist period.

Centre for Fair Political Analysis has previously pointed out that separate “nations” are developing within Hungary, with their own institutional systems, realities and visions. We are however, still very far from speaking of a pillarized community similar to that of the Netherlands. At the same time, it shows that polarization of the political arena is more acute, pervasion between the “two-Hungarys” is less prevalent, and at this point the communities no longer consider each other as opponents with legitimate social mandates.

Hungarian government parties and the opposition are becoming more and more isolated from each other and a significant cut of the society. Elections are incapable of pacifying the political sphere, Fidesz-KDNP and the opposition forces mutually question each other’s legitimacy. At the same time the opposition is placed in an even more difficult position than the government by positioning itself as an “anti-system” advocate, which led to the government emphasizing that the opposition is an outsider in the political system.

In spite of the growing levels of polarization, as we have already mentioned, the Dutch example must be handled with reserve, as in the case of Hungary, the political communities opposing each other do not represent the whole of society. According to surveys, more than one-third of the population does not know who it would vote for from the current parties, or does not wish to vote. A mutual consent, or grand coalition, as done in the Netherlands, could be a solution but not enough to diminish the current fragmentation, as by now, the number of voters who live in a “third” Hungary with no party preference can be put to millions.