Attila Tibor Nagy

Boycott – without a movement

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s cabinet initiated a referendum against the European Union’s plans about the compulsory settlement of migrants, which triggering international attention. This referendum will take place on 2 October 2016. The majority of the Hungarian left-wing opposition has decided that the only truly effective response to the government’s question is boycotting the referendum. But is it really a good answer? A 2010 analysis of the Brookings Institute by Matthew Frankel by the title Threaten but Participate: Why Election Boycotts Are a Bad Idea, notes that of the 171 cases studied, the opposition was able to achieve political success in only four percent of the boycotts.

Without a doubt, there are serious arguments for boycotting the referendum. While the parties of the opposition (MSZP, Együtt) do not explicitly state this, their intellectual supporters believe that the opposition can never win this battle, the government’s side (vote “no”) will prevail either way. Indeed, most opinion polls indicate that the Hungarian population has a very strong anti-immigration attitude, which the government is trying to use to its advantage. Therefore, it seems to be more profitable to make the referendum ineffective and invalid by boycotting it. On the other hand, the aforementioned analysis of Matthew Frankel demonstrates with a long list of examples that most election boycotts are counterproductive; they usually fail and may even end-up strengthening the opposing camp. This is because the parties calling for a boycott waive from the start their rights to influence the decision-making process and be represented in the legislature. This disproportionately increases the mandate ratio of the ruling party in the parliament and, in addition, they deprive themselves of the opportunity of controlling the government at all.

Matthew Frankel found that election boycotts led to success only in two particular cases:

1. When the opposition had gained the support of the crowd, and the boycott was only part of a large resistance movement that led to significant street demonstrations, strikes and other forms of civil resistance. In 2000, great mass movements led to the resign of Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori, who was accused of election abuses. To achieve success, it was also essential to have a charismatic challenger named Alejandro Toledo. In the end, the president-in-office withdrew from participation in the
election due to the allegations of corruption, and the 2001 election was won by Toledo.

2. When the electoral system had strict minimal participation rates for the election to be valid.

It should be noted that the paper of the US think tank analyses not the boycott of referendums, but parliamentary elections.

Nevertheless, we believe that the Brookings study has some important observations related to the upcoming referendum in Hungary. Namely that the Hungarian left wing could achieve significantly better results if they would function not only as political parties, but also as a movement. A movement that could mobilize large crowds for political purposes, and their leaders could call not just a few hundred, but thousands of people to protest against the rearrangement of the City Park for example; a movement that would have such cohesive force that it could call tens or even hundreds of thousands of people to the streets against any action of the government that are considered to be undemocratic. We do not have to go far for an example of this, since in the year 2000, continued protests managed to overthrow President Slobodan Milošević in Serbia (a country with even less democratic tradition than Hungary).

A truly strong leftist movement would be a significant force against the Orbán cabinet, provided that its participants would actually feel the political aims to be close to them, and be also willing to act for them. It goes without saying that this kind of movement requires leaders who can inspire the masses, and who can orient members with their personal example and dedication. Leaders who are credible and free from corruption, for whom it is worth even to undertake penalties for civil disobedience. These leaders and their assistants could visit town after town, village after village to persuade the voters. A movement is also a political community: it includes shared cultural experiences, sporting events, and spaces in which members of the community experience togetherness in a positive way.

However, during the past six years, the Hungarian left wing did not believe in movement building: press conferences, television discussions, performances followed each other incessantly, instead of mass protests of the left-wing parties. They acted as if though even left-wing leaders did not believe that party politics could be transformed into a mass
movement. Perhaps they were right, because up until now, their leaders have not been found to be so resounding and credible that they could inspire the masses in the long run.

Out of the six referendums held in Hungary, the participation rate was able to exceed the necessary fifty percent only in two cases (in 1989 and 2008), so the left wing can easily hope that the participation rate will remain below the expected level even this time. However, it remains to be seen to what extent will the opposition be able to benefit from this technical success, if, for example, the participation rate will not be dramatically lower than the validity threshold (e.g. one cannot simply call the opinion of three million voters “insignificant”). Also the lack of leftist votes may also lead to a situation where the government’s side is supported by even ninety percent of the participating voters. If the proportion of votes sharing the government’s views would be very high, then it may be possible that eventually the government will have a better position following the referendum battle, even if the referendum itself will be invalid. This is especially so if we accept the opposition’s constantly voiced allegations about Fidesz’s advantage in the media, because that would enable the government to share their interpretation more prominently (that despite the insufficient participation rate, the vast majority of voters still supported their views).

This is where the lack of a leftist mass movement is counter productive. If the left wing had the support of the masses and an active community, they could be confident that they can win this battle, and the majority of the votes will be “yes”. Lacking this, the democratic opposition simply surrenders in the struggle over the referendum’s question, and they can only hope that the participation rate will be very low. But it is not inconceivable that the participation rate will exceed fifty percent, and in this case, the Hungarian left wing will suffer a serious defeat.