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Is Vona the „Hungarian Haider”?

Rig Lajos, the representative of Jobbik, won the interim elections in Tapolca on 12 April. The far-right party’s first individual mandate brought about quite an excitement among those who follow politics. While Jobbik is gradually establishing itself in the smaller settlements of Hungary, particularly small towns and villages, the defeated left wing and liberal opposition is incapable of coming around. Many believe that Jobbik could become the Fidesz-KDNP’s only challenger with a chance of winning in 2018 - provided the status quo within the party remains as is and the party retains its support (which is quite unlikely). It is also worth watching if the opposition establishes itself more efficiently in the small settlements.

Centre for Fair Political Analysis has written about the fact that Hungary ought to try the grand coalition, which is an existing model in several countries including Austria, Netherlands, Germany and Denmark for solving social and political conflicts. Many people consider it timely to establish a grand coalition between the center-right and center-left. In the likely event of Jobbik’s further strengthening, attempting to keep the far right from getting too much power could be a reason to bring the left and right closer together. From time to time though, the left and liberal intellectuals raise the question: what happens if Fidesz’s efforts of weakening Jobbik fail, and the party does not want to join forces with the left at all. The question remains unanswered whether, in an electoral situation, where Jobbik is the make-or-break party, would it be possible that Fidesz enters into a coalition with Jobbik? Or, in other words, referring to the Austrian example of 1999, could the “haiderization” of Hungary be the next move?

We do not wish to go into the history of the People’s Party led by Wolfgang Schüssel in detail. It is enough to know that owing to a coalition agreement between the Austrian People’s Party and the Freedom Party of Austria, Jörg Haider’s party, could form government. As a result, for a short time Austria became the pariah of the
European Union. After Jörg Haider, the governor of Carinthia took over the leadership of the FPÖ in 1986, the party took a turn for a strongly anti-elitist, nationalist and anti-immigration direction. There were protests against the two-party government coalition, both in Austria and abroad (even though Haider himself was not in the government.) However, the cordon sanitaire against the extreme right ultimately failed. The protesters slowly accepted the existence of a small coalition, and it is not even remembered in the European Union anymore.

The strengthening of Haider’s party calles attention to another issue: just like in Hungary, the left-wing and liberal intellectuals in Austria didn’t understand the key to Haider’s success. Which is not that the Austrian society is far right, nor the Nazi history of the party (FPÖ was labeled the “Nazi party” even in their liberal phase - with more reason than Jobbik). The thing is, that the large parties, instead of attempting to stand up to Haider in issues of policy, opted to isolate him - either labeling him a Nazi or completely ignoring him. This practice however resulted in revulsion among the voters against corrupt party elites and the overall consensus model of Austrian democracy.

In the 1994 elections FPÖ extended its support among the youth and working class. Every third working class Austrian and every third young person voted for Haider. As in Hungary, the FPÖ cut deeply into the electoral community that was previously the territory of the left, namely that of the Social Democratic Party of Austria. SPÖ had lost a great part of its traditional base exactly because it was incapable of renewing its image. While at present it is too early to draw conclusions for 2018 regarding the individual mandate of Jobbik. It is certain though, that if the Hungarian left- and liberal forces want to avoid the same predicament as SPÖ, they have to establish a relationship with the local communities. Building from bottom to top - as Jobbik does - is a necessary step, as well as speaking to the voters honestly about relevant social and policy issues, and arguing with local supporters of Jobbik. The “cordon sanitaire” or isolation of Jobbik seems appealing, however - learning from Austria’s example - is ultimately ineffective.