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Opportunity knocks for Hungarian opposition

2015 was particularly unfortunate for the Hungarian opposition in terms of communication. The migrant crisis had inhibited every alternative message, while the governing Fidesz-KDNP was able to debut an initiative appearance in the issue all along. By 2016 the number of illegal immigrants had decreased to a minimal number and the issue of immigration had escalated to an international level, as seen in Prague during the recent meeting of the Visegrád Group. This opens up a window for the opposition to take a stand and an initiative instead of merely reacting to the topics proposed by the government parties.

Former socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány had presented his pamphlet, “The Hungary of Many”, which will serve as the basis of his party program. Similarly to Fidesz, Gábor Vona, head of far right opposition party Jobbik has propagated National Consultation on health, education and corruption. Alongside Jobbik, eco-social LMP also sees the opportunity to break out in the latter topic. Along the lines of the weekly government information sessions of János Lázár, the Minister of the Prime Minister’s office, the party gives corruption-information sessions on a weekly basis since the end of January. This program draws attention to a potential new narrative of the opposition.

Why can corruption be a breakout opportunity for the opposition? Corruption is a recurring issue in Hungarian politics but has never been present as such a comprehensive anti-system message. This is because part of Fidesz’s aspirations is to create a similar cultural and economic heartland to that which has existed on the liberal left ever since the 1990 system change, which in part carried over its economic and political capital from the previous regime. To some extent this is also because the issue of corruption was previously simply embedded into anti-establishment policy and the only thought on the matter was “The post regime-
change political elite is corrupt, they steal, cheat and lie, and have to be collectively replaced."

András Lánczi, chairman of Századvég Foundation, operating also as a think tank for Fidesz and government administration, says that what we view today as corruption is Fidesz’s main policy in effect. He believes that strengthening the entrepreneurial class is important to Fidesz.

“This is to what they say ‘but that is corruption itself!’ However, that is a political point of view; it is actually making the word ‘corruption’ mythical.” In fact, even Viktor Orbán uses this argument, when he mentions that besides multinational companies, the Hungarian economy needs national investors (even if “constructed” by public funds), to reduce the country’s exposure. But why does Fidesz downplay the issue of corruption? Because, up until 2010, it was a significant problem for them that during the change of regime, political elites of the time set aside significant economic capital for themselves, and even the subsequent wave of privatization did not strengthen Fidesz’s economic heartland.

Their two-thirds parliamentary majority after the 2010 change of government created an opportunity for them – which they grabbed – to begin to break down the economic strongholds favored by the previous governments and systems, using legal and other means. Simultaneously, they set about to create a class of large and medium corporations, which they claimed to be national and caring about the interests of Hungary. All of this was carried out in a manner that tried to incorporate the spectacular enrichment of some entrepreneurs and the redistribution of economic sectors previously dominated by foreign companies in its philosophy, defending them against corruption charges, which may have constituted an obvious communication breakthrough for the opposition.

The opposition parties and civil society try to react on the same level to this systematic effort. The opposition parties promised to hold them to account following their victory, as well as to review the redistributed markets and the assets...
nationalized or privatized with the aid of government power. Also, organizations spawned (átlátszó.hu, Direkt36, K-Monitor) or strengthened (Transparency International, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union) in civil society during the past few years, all aiming to fight against corruption, and protect private property and the rule of law. In Hungary, however, political parties and civilians do not cooperate, and they are unlikely to do so in the future as well. Therefore, the opposition parties can often rely only on the various institutions of the European Union: the Anti-Fraud Office, the Court, the Committee and the Parliament.