The Siamese twins of Hungarian politics

Hungarian politics was all about domestic politics in March, rather than foreign policy. In February, the prime minister had two important international meetings in Budapest (one with Merkel, one with Putin), but in the next month people followed the internal policies with more interest; the ruling party’s internal problems were exacerbated.

Fidesz seems to be more divided today than even a month ago. However, we – unlike many Hungarian think tanks – usually try to draw attention to the wider context beyond the current internal problems of the Fidesz. For example, to the fact that the Fidesz’s current state fits into a longer, historical trend of development. Hungary was a one-party system before 1990, and prior to that, almost a one-party system – meaning that although there were many parties in parliament, it was always the same party that won the elections. This tradition has been in place for 150 years in Hungary.

Western European readers have little knowledge of such governance tradition, because, in recent decades, governments have come and gone there; both politicians and voters have learnt how to win and lose. Hungary had 16 years to learn this, namely between 1990 and 2006, when every election was won by a different party, and the country’s overall political climate was much better than it is now.

Even in this period of relative stability, it was clear that there were many unresolved issues. It was to be expected that some party will eventually want to get their hands on power for a longer period. Ferenc Gyrucszány and the Hungarian left was the first to succeed in this in 2006, when he won the election for the second time in a row. In 2010 however, the left suffered a humiliating defeat – the demand to build a strong and capable governing party nevertheless remained. This became – in accordance to the tradition of Hungarian history – Fidesz.

At the beginning of April 2015, it seems to us that regardless of how weathered Fidesz may seem internally, it is still dominated by Viktor Orbán. His basis to do so lies in the fact that the majority of Hungarian voters are (as we said) used to strong leadership. Moreover, a party in possession of such a majority can bear the secession of even one or two dozen representatives: its parliamentary majority is not at risk.
It can be concluded that currently, Hungarian politics is all about this large governing party and the opposition follows exactly the same historical path that their predecessors paved. Again, this is unknown to the Western reader, who is perhaps taken aback: how can the opposition not benefit from the increasing government corruption? Because the opposition is fragmented into six or seven different parties, and is perfectly incapable of governing. In fact, there is an even closer relationship between the state of the government and the opposition: the fragmentation of the opposition and the centralizing tendency of the government are conjoined twins of each other. Thus, up until there is no strong, structurally concentrated opposition, the ruling party can always claim to be the national interest's sole representative in face of this fractured opposition.

So, once again, we have to call attention to the fact that the opposition must join forces, if it ever wants to win an election and wants to open a new chapter in the history of the post-socialist era.