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The tipping point of Hungarian politics

Global media turned its attention once again to Hungary as citizens took to the streets to protest an internet tax proposal which sparked the largest demonstrations against the current government so far. While this spontaneous move does not mean that a new opposition has been born, it has become clear that despite Fidesz’s three electoral wins this year, the party’s support is not unquestioned, and voters will not just sit back and relax until 2018.

Following the October municipal elections, the two most frequently asked questions were what will happen next; will the “true” face of Fidesz surface, and what direction will the liberal-left take after this series of losses. While we do not think the effects of the recent mass protests should be overestimated, we do see it as a key event both in the life of Fidesz, the liberal-left opposition, as well as future formations not associated with the currently existing parties. We hold the protests to be a tipping point, in the sense that Malcolm Gladwell’s book of the same title that shows how sometimes seemingly unimportant things can make a big difference in society. In this case, while the protests will not bring early elections or a change of government, it has shown that there is pent up frustration on all sides of the political spectrum, that has surfaced, giving an impetus to civil society which may eventually lead to a group of activists stepping into the limelight and becoming a formal movement that can serve as an alternative to the currently weak liberal-left opposition facing the government.

Parallel to the germination of a new social movement we can also see that the liberal-left opposition has retreated following the municipal elections. There was a clear message from the organizers of the mass protest for the “old” opposition not to taint their event. This has cooled the power struggle starting to emerge between the different parties. This internal tug-of-war over who should lead the left is exactly why that the protests and their civil organizers have generated such publicity. Opposition voters are waiting for renewal, preferably from outside of the sphere of the currently existing left-wing parties. At the same time all of these parties are waving the flag of renewal too, but how exactly do they see this?
Following the municipal elections, Ferenc Gyurcsány, the Head of the Democratic Coalition party (DK) wrote in a Facebook post, that DK could strengthen its status as a mid-size party nationwide, saying that for him this is a great achievement as even without the capital and the city-counties the party reached six percent, which leads them to believe that their countrywide support is around 8%. They will be members of the general assembly in Budapest as well as in sixteen counties; as a result, they will be stronger than before. Meanwhile – according to Gyurcsány – Fidesz has lost 330,000 voters nationwide compared to 2010. In the years to come until 2018, the former prime minister plans to rethink what needs to be done differently.

While DK is certainly not the strongest force on the liberal-left opposition, and perhaps Gyurcsány’s estimate was a little too optimistic, DK is certainly at the helm of the much needed process of renewal which is the only way for the liberal-left to survive. This however reopens a conflict that has been suppressed time and time again during the election year. That is, who should lead the unified left, if at all there is need for a unified left?

Centre for Fair Political Analysis holds that the Hungarian party system should ideally transition into two large catch all parties – one on the liberal-left side, the other on the conservative-center right – the majority of left wing politicians are still reluctant to even think about such a change. Until now, the primary reason behind this was that their main task was to dislodge the current power from government. However we can see that their strategy not only did not oust Viktor Orbán, their positions have not become better over the past four years. The only thing the liberal-left has to show for itself over four years of being in opposition is that it became more and more fragmented, and that an idea for handling this situation has surfaced within DK.

While Ferenc Gyurcsány is unlikely to be the face of a unified left that could successfully take on Prime Minister Orbán in 2018, it is sure that there is one party that would definitely like to see him out of the political sphere once and for all. This party is MSZP. The strongest party on the left is seriously challenging DK, as it would like to regain its former image as the political contender of Fidesz. They too have spoken of a “new era”, aiming to build a left wing catch all party and most of all, freeing themselves from the ideological direction of DK and other smaller parties they were forced to work together with over the campaign. MSZP was not interested in the opening of a power struggle on the left as it didn’t want to question its
formerly evident leading position. Following the European Party elections it seemed that its dominance had withered away. The tables have turned however with the municipal elections, and the party’s confidence has returned accordingly. While at this time we can not tell who will come out winner in this conflict, it is a competition that certainly needs to be fought. The “fight” needs to be about much more than infrastructure, or personal issues though. Without a complete ideological renewal and a highly competitive offer both to the voters and the minor opposition parties there is no chance to avoid repeating the same mistakes that have been made in the past four years.

This can only be done through serious intellectual background work in minimum two areas. One is the mapping of what trends can be found within the socialist, social democratic, liberal and green parties in Europe. How do they tackle their opponents, and if they have fallen out of government, how do they return to power? What changes have they made? This process should be followed by assessing how these ideas could be put to practice in Hungary, if at all. Once this theoretical analysis has been done then the parties can begin searching for new faces and alliances to support this program.

Momentarily we see that most of the liberal-left opposition parties have retreated into their shell, perhaps to assess their loss. Not much could be heard from them even though there have been quite a few media issues concerning Fidesz that they could have benefited from. To step away from daily politics however, the reason it is important from the point of view of these parties to “suffer the consequences” and rebuild themselves from bottom up, is that if they don’t they may be replaced not by a new party on the left, but by the conservative, pro-Europe inner opposition of Fidesz. As long as there is no strong liberal-left party to counter Fidesz it’s most potent opponent is itself. The composition of the demonstrations was highly heterogeneous with just as many people who had never taken part in any form of political protest as those who had voted pro-government but were frustrated by the 700 Ft internet tax. That the first demonstration could turn violent showed however that there is no authoritative leadership yet which can channel the energy of this representative crowd into a serious political force to contend with. Nevertheless the emergence of such a crowd is a game changing factor, a small but highly influential event that has far reaching effects.
The fact that Lajos Bokros, the head of the MOMA party could burst into the liberal-left scene receiving 30% of the votes of the left in face of the Fidesz candidate at the Budapest mayoral elections shows that a formerly liberal politician who was once a minister of a socialist government yet defines himself as a conservative politician proves that there is room for transitions within the Hungarian political sphere. From the currently existing parties, the green party, Politics Can Be Different (LMP), which didn’t gain a significant amount of votes, however could evade falling apart following its split before the election year could also be an alternative in the long run to the liberal-left opposition.

Finally to return to Fidesz; Many people say, that the internet tax was where Fidesz’s mask came off. It was the first time following the elections that it tried to push trough a tax which would have (as perceived by the public) affected the voters pockets directly. While in reality this was not the case, it was clearly not communicated well and the political cost was much higher than expected.

Financially, we project that the government will follow a similar strategy as earlier trying to bring in external funds instead of austerity measures taking away directly from citizens. Whatever restructuring might follow will be communicated similar to the earlier taxing of the banks etc. The internet tax, in theory fell into this line as well, however it came across exactly the other way around. Instead of being communicated as an extra-tax on the telecommunications sector it came out as a tax for the most important daily information source of the politically most active sphere of society. No wonder that such a diverse crowd raised its voice against it. Event the right wing media joined in the canon.

The timing of the tax proposal and its eventual withdrawal raises the question of it being a distraction, a political trompe l’oeil. The only issue that seriously threatens Fidesz momentarily – is the quality of the country’s diplomatic relations with the West, which seems to be deteriorating rapidly. This has even raised voices from within Fidesz warning against going against the United States. They know that Fidesz can not win this fight, at a certain point it will have to consider its surroundings and backtrack. The internet tax may have been aimed to confine the U.S conflict in public discourse, however the political cost of the mass protests and foreign warnings that ensued were much higher than expected.
With the Prime Minister retreating in this issue we may indeed be seeing the beginning of a new era, where the 2/3’s majority may no longer be enough political strength. Formerly, when the government was faced with such attacks, it could point at the pro-government rallies that brought 100,000 people to the streets in support of their policies. With an equal number of people marching against them, this source of legitimacy will no longer suffice. While we do not have enough public information to analyze in depth the banning of Hungarian public officials from the U.S. for now, there is a conclusion we can draw from the situation aside from the fact that this is the strongest warning that the Fidesz government has received from abroad so far. It seems that the foreign press and international organizations are still the strongest opposition of the Orbán government and it seems that the tides have just begun to turn.