Fidesz's Two-Thirds

BY
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Hungary's far-right party has won a crushing victory. And the opposition is in tatters.

In Budapest, the results of the recent national elections came as a surprise to many. The historically high turnout (68 percent) had led commentators to speculate whether something was finally changing in Hungary, which has been firmly ruled by Viktor Orbán's far-right Fidesz party since 2010. Many expected the high voter turnout to boost the opposition.

It wasn't to be. Fidesz won handily, receiving over 49 percent of the vote and winning all but a handful of electoral districts in Budapest and a few other places.

The incredulity of the Budapest-based intelligentsia speaks volumes about the state of the country's opposition — and of the deepening divide between citizens in the capital and elsewhere. But their sense of shock was also puzzling: pollsters had predicted the results quite precisely. Fidesz was favored to triumph. Many were simply unwilling to believe that the party would win so resoundingly, especially given the large share of voters involved in a "tactical vote" movement.

Unfortunately, their online and social-media bubble burst on the evening of April 8, and they were left to call, quite desperately and rather ironically, for a demonstration pronouncing, "We are the majority!"

The Making of a Bubble

In the weeks leading up to the April 8 contest, municipal election results in Hódmezővásárhely, a Fidesz stronghold since the 1990s, raised hopes that the far-right party was finally on its back heels. An independent candidate, supported by the cooperating opposition parties, won by a significant margin against the local Fidesz pro-consul. If the tide could turn in Hódmezővásárhely, opposition leaders thought, anything was possible.

In retrospect, the victory — in a town of less than 50,000 — was an aberration. Nonetheless, the surprising win fueled an electoral strategy to overturn the seemingly immovable government: for the sake of "regime change," all opposition parties should unite, regardless of their ideological background, and the strongest opposition candidate should be supported in every electoral district.

The plan had been brewing for some time. Various political and civil organizations, united under the umbrella of "Country for All Movement," ran a series of surveys to determine the strongest anti-Fidesz candidate in the most competitive districts; the weaker candidates were then supposed to step aside. This call for tactical voting sparked much discussion both inside and outside the country, with liberal editorialists like Cas Mudde even suggesting that in order to overcome the Orbán regime, the liberal opposition should join forces with the Jobbik party, an extreme-right formation that has tried, like Marine Le Pen in France, to clean up its image and present itself as more moderate.

In the end, though, the "tactical vote" strategy confused the opposition and the electorate alike. In the final week before the elections, the opposition parties — rather than challenging Orbán's narratives or proposing a new vision for Hungary — were busy discussing how to make the tactical vote work. Few candidates were willing to bow out in support of stronger ones, and many of those who did opted to do so individually. Without explicit coordination among the parties, the effort floundered.

According to a counterfactual study by Zoltán Kmetty, a sociologist from Eötvös Loránd University, the "tactical vote" strategy prevented Fidesz from attaining an even more resounding victory. But the far-right party still won two-thirds of the seats in parliament.

Orbán and the Opposition

The "tactical vote" movement was largely the work of the liberal opposition, a bloc dominated by tech-savvy, urban, educated voters. While well-intentioned, they failed to venture outside their communicative bubble — attempting to reach other educated, urban people at ease with social media — and used tactical maneuvers to try to deflate Fidesz rather than advancing a clear programmatic alternative. As a result, Orbán set the agenda while the liberal opposition simply reacted.

Aside from anti-corruption rhetoric, opposition parties offered nothing new to voters. The election program of the ostensibly socialist party — as well as that of its liberal spin-off, Democratic Coalition — contained little progressive content. Discredited due to past betrayals, lacking a strategy to expand beyond partisan die hards, these parties failed to offer voters a credible left-wing alternative. Their opposition was stylistic, rather than substantive.

This is partly because in the liberal camp, there is a deep misunderstanding of Orbán's politics. To hear many liberal commentators tell it, Orbán is an illiberal intrusion, an unknown creature in the European political taxonomy.

Yet as the Hungarian sociologist József Böröcz has argued, describing the Orbán government as "illiberal" overlooks its resemblance to figures outside Eastern Europe. "It makes it impossible," Böröcz notes, "to point at the astonishing similarities between Orbán's regime and not only, say, the political situation in Russia or Turkey (the comparisons that are often made) but also with recent political developments in the United States, France, Austria, Italy, Germany, etc."

Orbán is a liberal at his core, topped off with some colorful nationalism and racism. The same could be said of Italy's Berlusconi or France's Sarkozy or, more recently, Austria's Sebastian Kurz. Has Western Europe already forgotten Italy's anti-immigrant Bossi Fini law, or France's ban on face-covering (which Kurz is now considering implementing)? Do we really have to remind aghast liberals that Switzerland voted for a constitutional amendment, proposed by the far-right Swiss People's Party, to ban the building of minarets?

Some western critics are now calling on the European People's Party (EPP) — the umbrella formation that hosts or hosted (among others) Berlusconi's Forza Italia, Sarkozy's Les Republicains, Kurz's ÖVP, and Merkel's CDU — to expel Orbán from their circle. Yet the EPP is a perfect place for Orbán, and Orbán's Hungary is a perfect fit for the EU's liberal project. While Orbán might declare his intent domestically "to stop Brussels," his economic program is a dream come true for the Brussels elite.

Hungary boasts the EU's lowest business taxes, a shrunken welfare state, strong fiscal discipline, a stable political situation, an abundance of cheap labor, and no noisy trade unions. The monthly average net wage in Hungary is 635 euros, the median wage even lower.

Given these conditions, what is Brussels or the EPP expected to do beyond issue strongly worded statements? The black sheep is also a goose that lays the golden egg.

Indeed, if the Orbán regime works, it is partly thanks to the complacency of Europe, especially the core countries that have invested much in Hungary and want to see their investment remain safe. What many core European countries desire in places like Hungary is "stabilocracies": "weak democracies with autocratically minded leaders, who govern through informal, patronage networks and claim to provide pro-Western stability in the region." These are, after all, the same people who turned the Greek crash into a humanitarian crisis and abetted the rise of the fascist Golden Dawn party. They could hardly be expected to care about the state of Hungarian democracy.

What Is to Be Done?

On his official English website, Orbán describes his agenda as resting on four main pillars: competitiveness, a workfare society, demographic policy, and identity-based politics. "All decisions made by this government could fit into these categories," he says.

By competitiveness, Orbán means keeping wages low and crushing trade unions. But by "workfare society," he refers to the massive public-works programs he's implemented. Even though they offer a meager 150 euros for menial work, the programs are still a godsend for the poorest.

Orbán has been remarkably successful at detecting the political mood of Hungary, perhaps because his party is well rooted throughout the country, especially in the countryside. Opposition parties, meanwhile, have little connection to the constituencies they should represent.

While Fidesz's policies mainly benefit the middle and upper classes, the public-works programs are popular among downscale voters. The liberal opposition likes to frown on such programs, labeling them patronage, if not pure clientelism — without truly realizing their own grave shortcomings in addressing poverty. When in government, the so-called left-wing parties had even less to offer.

Given the parlous state of the opposition, it's easier to see why Orbán has won the hearts and minds of poor Hungarians, even if his economic and social policies largely work against them. Chantal Mouffe explains it well:

> In a context where the dominant discourse proclaims that

> there is no alternative to the current neoliberal form of globalization and that we have to submit to its diktats, it is small wonder that more and more workers are keen to listen to those who claim that alternatives do exist, and that they will give back to the people the power to decide.

The opposition should restart from there. Not barricading themselves, in their Budapest environs, expressing contempt for Fidesz voters, but going out and doing what Orbán did so well: listening to them. The press is concerned about the risk to democracy that a Fidesz supermajority poses, and rightly so. But democracy is also in danger when elites are not able to listen anymore.

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