Together against Orbán: Hungary's new opposition

Robert Hodonyi, Helga Trüpel
22 March 2013

Amid international concern over government reforms that endanger democracy in Hungary, Hodonyi and Trüpel discover a political renaissance in Hungarian civil society. Ahead of elections in Spring 2014, this may well be an antidote to the EU's "political half-heartedness" on the matter.

At the beginning of the year Prime Minister Victor Orbán predicted that 2013 would be the “Year of Harvest” for Hungary and that everything would be better than in 2012. To reap the fruits of his own policies, as he had already declared in a speech to Hungarian diplomats in August 2012, the path of “unorthodox” measures would be continued and further conflicts even with the EU would not be shied away from. [1] Orbán’s announcement may well impress his followers but to minorities in the country, the opposition and European institutions it must seem like a cynical threat. Although Orbán is still leading in the polls, the right-wing conservative government coalition Fidesz-KNDP has lost a significant share of the votes (41 per cent, down 12 per cent compared with 2010). The two-thirds majority is a thing of the past.

A determination to cement power

Since the “revolution at the ballot box” (in Orbán’s words) the government has been pulling out all the stops to implement laws aimed at cementing its own power and in the long term preventing other political majorities. The latest example of this is the introduction of the compulsory registration of voters, which for the time being has been blocked by the Hungarian constitutional court; this is, however, only one element of the proposed electoral reform that Orbán has declared a priority for his current term in office. Compulsory registration would have barred spontaneous voters and citizens without any clear party political preferences from voting, thus favouring the Orbán camp. The government is not contesting the ruling of the constitutional court. Rather than admit defeat it is in the process of preparing a law aimed at overturning the prevailing constitutional practice and henceforth prohibiting the court from using its own rulings of the last 22 years as a basis for its judgement. [2]

With such “reforms”, Orbán’s Fidesz Party is already positioning itself for the next
general election to be held in the spring of 2014. And the Hungarian public is already eyeing next year’s election as a “key election for the state of the nation”. In the wake of the “cold civil war” between the Left and the Right, an anti-Orbán alliance has formed and is now in the process of establishing itself as an institution and exploring possible coalitions with parliamentary oppositions for 2014. But also, profound changes are taking place in the relationship to “Brussels” and the European partners, not to mention the constant flirtation and increased economic co-operation with authoritarian regimes such as Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. This article looks at both the state of the conflict with the EU on the one hand and the new awakening of civil society on the other, as well as the relation between these phenomena.

Hungary v Europe?

Infringements under Article 258 of the functioning of the European Union (TFEU) are nothing out of the ordinary. Every year the European Commission, as “guardian of the treaties”, initiates numerous procedures against individual member states. However, the concentrated action against Hungary on 17 January 2012 in relation to the new media laws, the independence of the central bank, the judiciary and data protection authorities took on a new dimension. How would a member state be dealt with that violates the Copenhagen criteria, contravenes the EU Fundamental Rights Charter and no longer fulfils the EU accession criteria? Even the European Parliament in a resolution on 16 February 2012 expressed deep concern at the situation in Hungary with regard to the practice of democracy, the rule of law, the respect for and protection of human and social rights, the separation of powers, equality and non-discrimination. However, since then it has all gone quiet, very quiet.

In the country itself the traditionally rather pro-European stance of the leading party politicians in the government camp has given way to a eurosceptic course. Dramatic evidence of this is to be found in Orbán’s remarks that EU criticism of the situation in Hungary is a “campaign of the international left” and that “Brussels” is the new “Moscow”. [3] “The cynical comparison of the European institutions with the Soviet super power” – in the words of writer and historian György Dalos in his “Speech on Democracy” in the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig on 9 October 2012 – “has meant that Hungary risks losing the remnants of the reputation the country enjoyed, thanks to its participation in the Eastern European emancipation process, up to that point”.

Limited success for Europe

The Hungarian government, under EU pressure, has had to make some concessions. In the first half of 2011 during the Hungarian Presidency of the EU, clauses in the new media laws (compulsory registration, their applicability to all foreign media suppliers) were withdrawn and in July 2012, following the judgement of the Hungarian Constitutional Court, further amended (protection for those providing information, monitoring the content of the printed media by the media authority NMHH). However, about 550 journalists from public broadcasters have lost their jobs and 70 penalties have been imposed on 36 media providers. In 2011 alone the fines amounted to the equivalent of 1.4 million euros. [4]

Even with regard to the independence of the central bank, the Orbán administration
initially seemed to be making concessions to the EU. However, in March this year the head of the Hungarian National Bank, András Simor, relinquished his post at the end of his scheduled term. Simor was reputed to be a fierce critic of the “unorthodox” economic policies of Fidesz. His successor is now the Chancellor of the Exchequer, György Matolcsy. As a close follower of Orbán, he will determine the future policies of the central bank - thus resulting in precisely that monetary dependence on the government that the EU Monetary Affairs Commissioner Olli Rehn wanted to avoid at all costs.

While the independence of the data protection authorities remain in the balance, the controversial law on the early retirement of judges would appear to have paid off for Orbán too. It is by this means that the Hungarian government intends to assume control of the judiciary. The decision of the European Court of Justice in November 2012, in response to an appeal by the EU Commission, confirming that the law violates the non-discrimination rule in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights came too late. Last year alone over 230 judges - some ten percent of the Hungarian judiciary - were discharged on the grounds of age and replaced by new judges and prosecutors acceptable to Orbán. The European Court of Justice has requested that corrections be made to the law but the outcome of the process remains to be seen.

**A dangerous return to discrimination**

In addition, great upheavals in the spheres of education and culture have gone largely unnoticed by the European public. Special classes for Romany children in schools clearly violate current EU law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Moreover, extreme right-wing poets like Jozsef Nyirö (1889-1953) from the time of the fascist regime form part of the new curricula. And there has been a revival of the cult surrounding the former regent and Hitler ally Miklós Horthy (1868-1957) (some communities wish to re-name central town and city squares). These are clear signs of revisionism and a policy of renationalization.

The government has grudgingly responded to the EU’s criticisms. In spite of the disapproval that the “outside” interference has prompted, the measures taken as a result are accepted in Hungary as a relevant, external corrective. They are welcomed by Orbán opponents: in contrast to their opposition, the Orbán government cannot simply ignore criticism from Brussels. A further positive result of the measures is that the country’s disputes have attracted international attention. This complicates and delays the dismantling of democracy and the erosion of the rule of law. At the same time, the measures have led to the creation of a domestic forum in which the opposition can voice its opinion. Unlike the aggressive exclusion strategy implemented against the Austrian government upon the creation of the coalition with the FPÖ in 2000, this time Commission and the European Council are tending towards a more cautious strategy. The legislative changes taking place in Hungary are being treated as purely formal breaches of EU law without any political assessment - in contrast to the one made by the European Parliament. Therefore, the EU has only been able to delay or partly check the antidemocratic reforms of the Hungarian government.

**The need for civil society**

György Dalos summarized the situation in an interview with the authors as follows: “It is
clear that Hungary’s problems and especially those within the country – both the authoritarian tendency of the government as well as the racist threat – must be solved through the power of civil society. The contribution of Europe and especially the EU should be aimed at urging the Orbán government, both publicly as well as through diplomatic channels, to agree to a national consultation with all the democratic groups inside and outside parliament in order to reduce the culture of hate, to establish dialogue between the forces of power and the public and prevent economic and social catastrophe. At the same time European institutions could support and help media providers disadvantaged as a result of political discrimination. [...] It would be particularly important to strengthen the contact with representatives of independent Romany organisations." However, in the face of the EU’s political half-heartedness, it is only fresh breaches of taboo such as the recent article by a Fidesz ideologist expressing Romany hatred and the anti-Semitic outbursts of the far-right Jobbik party, the third largest in parliament, that have brought the country’s situation back to the international headlines. One does not have to be a student of history to be concerned about the growing climate of intolerance in Hungary, as one commentator on CNN remarked. [5]

Hungarian civil society reinvents itself

Fewer and fewer Hungarians are willing to sit by and accept the measures taken by the government, with the result that Hungarian civil society has succeeded in reinventing itself in the last two years. The state of shock after the shift to the right of 2010 has given way to a new self-confidence; on the streets and squares of the country there has virtually been a political renaissance going far beyond the traditional milieus of critical intellectuals.

The sociologist and rapper Dorottya Karsay provides the soundtrack of the new protest movement. Her track “Nem Tetszik a Rendszer” (“I don’t like the system”) has become a YouTube hit with over one million hits so far. If it is true that pop culture is always a seismograph for socio-political change then there is a lot in store for this country of ten million people. At the moment it all comes down to the question of whether the Hungarian opposition will summon up the strength and wisdom to overcome differences in order to unite in challenging Fidesz in the next elections.

“Together 2014”: From the street into parliament?

In October 2012 the growing re-politicisation in the country led to the formation of a new opposition alliance “Together 2014” (“Együtt 2014”) that brought around 80,000 people onto the streets when it was officially established. The alliance has committed itself primarily to the restoration of the principles of the rule of law and a democratic system of control. Members of “Together 2014” include among others Orbán's predecessor, the former non-party Prime Minister, Gordon Bajnai, and his politico-economic think tank “Homeland and Progress” (“Haza es Haladas”). Bajnai deliberately avoids populist rhetoric and attempts instead to present himself as a moderate representative of the centre and the middle class.

The civil society organisation “Milla” is also part of the alliance. It emerged from the Facebook group “One Million for the Freedom of the Press”, which had established itself as a result of a protest against the new Hungarian media law and appeals above all to
young people. In addition the trade union action alliance “Solidarity” (“Szolidaritas”) has affiliated itself. Its demands focus on reforming the labour market and expanding the welfare state.

Student resistance is also an important part of opposition protests. The exorbitant increase in tuition fees in particular has led to strikes, demonstrations and university occupations in many cities. The “Network of Students” (“Hallgatói Hálózat”) is protesting against the “obligation to remain” as proposed in the framework of the new higher education laws. According to the government plans, new undergraduates in certain subjects have to sign a contract prior to starting their courses that commits them to remaining in Hungary for several years after graduating.

**Searching for political allies**

In this way “Together 2014” has mobilized a large number of politically disenchanted people – a trend that the established political parties are watching carefully, especially as the new alliance is planning to establish itself as a party and stand in the forthcoming parliamentary election. According to opinion polls, the alliance could receive between 10 and 20 per cent of the votes, and it is already exploring possible electoral alliances with the parliamentary opposition.

The social democratic party Magyar Szocialista Párt (MSZP) has expressed interest in a joint list. According to polls, the MSZP has recently gained considerable popularity. It currently has around 33 per cent of the votes – 12 per cent more than in 2010. However, Mesterházy’s claim to the leadership of the anti-Orbán alliance is stirring up controversy.

The Democratic Coalition (DK), an MSZP splinter group founded by former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, also wishes to join “Together 2014”. However, with potentially three percent of the vote, it only plays a minor role in Hungarian politics. In addition it would rob the electoral alliance of any credibility – as the social-democratic Prime Minister Gyurcsány had lied to the Hungarian people for years in order to gain acceptance for his neoliberal reforms. When the deception became public in 2006, angry protests finally forced him to resign.

The third party, the eco-party Lehet Más a Politika (LMP) split following internal divisions in the dispute over joining “Together 2014”. The day was finally carried by the wing led by the former parliamentary group chairman Andras Schiffer, but he has no wish to form a coalition with either the MSZP or “Together 2014”. Instead Schiffer has for a long time been pursuing the aim of working with Orbán’s Fidesz. However, the split in the party could cost them their parliamentary group status as polls show that they currently have about 5 per cent of the votes. As a result the eco-party is threatened with drifting into political insignificance.

Therefore the alliance “Together 2014” will have to limit itself to a core alliance of Mesterházy and Bajnai. Whether the new coalition will be strong enough to successfully confront Victor Orbán is still a completely open question at the present time. One thing is certain: the EU must not sit idly by in the time prior to the election. Instead it should further increase the pressure on Orbán’s government. This would not only put the wind in the sails of the new Hungarian opposition, but also Hungarian democracy itself.
Footnotes


Published 22 March 2013

Original in English
Translation by Alan Chamberlain
First published in Blätter 3/2013 (German version); Eurozine (English version)
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/together-against-orban-hungarys-new-opposition/)
© Robert Hodonyi, Helga Trüpel / Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik / Eurozine