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Unite and Conquer: Can Tisza Bring Down the Orbán System?

Article by Daniel Oross
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Over 16 years in power, Fidesz has reshaped its voter base from a traditionally conservative electorate into a broad illiberal coalition – one increasingly held together by patronage and dependency rather than ideology. After an endless list of scandals exposed the rot at the heart of this system, the question becomes whether Tisza's coalition of younger, predominantly urban, and well-educated voters can mobilise widely enough to bring down Hungary's autocracy. Orbán will stop at nothing to cling on to power.

For most of the 20th century, the working class-middle class divide was treated almost as a synonym for left-right in developed democracies. While the nature of this divide has evolved with the decline of traditional parties, class remains a significant predictor of voting behaviour in Western European countries. By contrast, in Eastern European democracies established after the fall of communism, the relationship to the former socialist regime has been more important than class position in determining political orientation.

The socialist system sought to determine who would fill specific positions across all levels of society. Unlike the electoral procedures typical of democratic systems, the selection of the nomenklatura was based on appointments made by the party. Appointment powers extended well beyond politics, including the nationalised economy and other segments and bodies of social life. Within the one-party state, this mechanism facilitated the smooth functioning of top-down decision-making and unquestioning implementation at every level of the system.

The nomenklatura was such a defining feature of the social order that, following the transition of 1989-90, it became one of the key political cleavages in the new system. While this cleavage progressively lost its relevance as the former elite retired from politics, Viktor Orbán's party, Fidesz, reintroduced a new version of it with the so-called "System of National Cooperation". Under this system, established in 2010, most appointment powers are held by the ruling party, and they extend to every aspect of public and economic life, from tobacco shop licenses to academic positions and local administrations.

This system has evolved into an effective support machine for Fidesz. Members of the nomenklatura regularly mobilise society in favour of the party, while those whose interests it has damaged tend to support Tisza, the leading opposition party.

Similar to how Fidesz reinvented the nomenklatura, the party was also very successful in reorganising its voter base over three and a half decades since its founding.

Who supports Orbán?

In 1990, when Fidesz was registered as a party and took part in its first parliamentary elections, the youthful nature of its base was visible in the party's name (Fidesz is an acronym for Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége, "Alliance of Young Democrats"), style, and electoral manifesto. Over the years, Fidesz began to attract older, less-educated, lower-status groups as well, partly due to its growing size.

However, the party's efforts were also devoted to winning over the middle class, as the 1995 addition of "Hungarian Civic Party" to its name suggests.

Later, as the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the trade unions lost workers' trust in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, Fidesz succeeded in making the nation an attractive collective identity for the working class. In this framing, the nation is seen as a community of moral solidarity. Thanks to this narrative, the proportion of manual labourers supporting Fidesz peaked in 2010. It has somewhat declined since then, but the party is still primarily supported by lower-status groups. Today, Fidesz's main base has shifted to the poorer neighbourhoods of major cities and the regions suffering from economic depression.

In many European countries, the urban-rural divide has become a defining political cleavage. A high degree of urbanisation often makes voting for the Left more likely, except where socialist movements have succeeded in aligning themselves with agrarian interests (for example, in Sweden). In Hungary, this division has shaped political behaviour from the early days of democracy in the 1990s. Budapest and a few other cities (typically those with a university campus) have diverged significantly from the rest of the country in most elections. Since 2002, Fidesz's electoral support has consistently been roughly 10 per cent lower in Budapest than in the countryside. The party's voter base has a strong rural, regional dimension: its strongholds are eight electoral districts located in the peripheral Southern Transdanubia and in the north-eastern part of the country.

Religion has also played an important role in shaping the profiles of political parties. In 1990, the first coalition government was not brought together by a shared economic vision, but by a commitment to the Christian-national tradition. Since 2010, the Fidesz government has provided significant support to religious organisations through budgetary allocations. In return for this support, the spiritual leaders of the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Church (Calvinist) have regularly mobilised their believers to vote for Fidesz.

In Hungary, the explanatory power of the left-right axis was strongest in 2006, at the height of the two-party system. At that time, "socialist" and "left-wing" were virtually synonymous, just as "Fidesz" and "right-wing". Since then, voting behaviour and ideological self-identification have become somewhat decoupled, in connection with the emergence of new parties. For example, the radical-moderate axis gained relevance after the extreme-right Mi Hazánk Mozgalom ("Our Homeland Movement") won parliamentary representation in 2022.

Today, Fidesz primarily appeals to voters of lower social and economic status, the elderly and retirees, the Roma minority, the unemployed, and other groups dependent on government transfers. In many ways, Fidesz's current voter base resembles that of MSZP in 2010. Among those aged 30 to 44, support for Fidesz does not even reach 10 per cent.

When "winner takes all" backfires

Under Orbán, Hungary experienced a well-documented decline in the quality of democracy. The government removed checks and balances and introduced radical constitutional transformations. Hungary became an illiberal system in which the government regularly frames the opposition as an enemy of the people. Fidesz created a structure where political competition is viewed as an all-or-nothing struggle.

This dynamic made it increasingly challenging for the opposition to operate. By 2018, over 70 per cent of

opposition voters (73 per cent of Jobbik voters and 87 per cent of supporters of other parties) did not consider parliamentary elections to be fair and free of fraud. Despite opposition forces trying all possible electoral formulas to beat Orbán's government at elections – from coordinating their candidates to open, multiparty, and digitalprimaries – Fidesz has won two-thirds majorities consecutively. Over the years, it has become evident that the parliamentary opposition to Fidesz cannot withstand the sustained pressure of the "System of National Cooperation".

However, illiberal systems can also be fragile. When they fail, it is often due to their inability to manage economic crises and internal scandals, or an overreach that causes them to lose support among more moderate voters. Fidesz's downfall may come from a combination of these factors.

A series of scandals involving the ruling party has eroded its foothold among traditionally well-off, conservative voters, including those in Budapest districts I, II, and XII. These voters were outraged to find out that Viktor Orbán's father, Győző, is about to complete construction of an opulent palace that flies in the face of the ethical principle of civic modesty. They were equally shaken when Gergő Bese, a Catholic priest who amplified Orbán's anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric, was found to have participated in gay sex parties in 2024.

But it was another scandal that dealt Fidesz the biggest – and possibly decisive – blow in the eyes of many voters. In February 2024, revelations that President Katalin Novák had pardoned a man involved in the cover-up of a child sexual abuse case led to her resignation. Former Minister of Justice Judit Varga, who had signed the pardons, also resigned from her parliamentary seat and from her role as leader of the Fidesz list for the European elections.

It was this crisis that catapulted Péter Magyar, Varga's ex-husband, to the centre of Hungarian political life. His first move was to organise an anti-government protest on 15 March, a national holiday commemorating the 1848 Revolution and the War of Independence against Habsburg rule. Since then, the opposition movement led by Magyar has grown to the point of threatening the illiberal incumbents.

Back to a two-party system?

Party systems in East-Central Europe have already demonstrated in the wake of the 2009 economic crisis that they are generally less stable and more permeable to newcomers than those in long-established democracies. In Hungary's 2010 elections, two new parties (the conservative Jobbik and the green-liberal LMP) entered the parliament, and the two main forces that had emerged from the regime change (the Socialists and the centre-right Hungarian Democratic Forum) suffered major losses from which they never recovered. Meanwhile, Fidesz gained a two-thirds majority of seats.

This week's elections are likely to be just as consequential. All current parliamentary opposition parties could lose representation, which would effectively turn Hungary into a two-party system again. The fact that some opposition candidates withdrew in order to maximise the chances of defeating Orban makes this outcome more likely.

Tisza is projected to win comfortably in Budapest, its main stronghold, and in all other large urban areas. Voters under the age of 40 are more likely than average to choose Magyar's party. First-time voters and college graduates also support it at a higher-than-average rate. The large number of voters (approximately 220,000) who have registered to cast their ballots at an address other than their official address reflects the mobilisation of university students in favour of Tisza.

But Magyar's party also appeals to those who identify as upper and upper-middle class, and a majority

of its supporters are religious. In this respect, Tisza's voter base resembles that of Fidesz back in 2006. Moreover, Tisza is expected to win about 70 per cent of the vote of Hungarians living abroad – another constituency that traditionally supported Fidesz. This shift reflects the dissatisfaction of Hungarians who emigrated after Fidesz came to power in 2010.

Vote rigging and social tension

According to most polls, Tisza is well ahead, while a growing list of scandals – from fabricatedespionage charges against a journalist to allegations of Russian interference and a major pollution case – is damaging Orbán's chances. However, it would be premature to count Fidesz out.

A documentary released in March, drawing on a six-month investigation by independent filmmakers and journalists, exposed the scale of Fidesz's illicit efforts to secure votes. Citizens, mayors, former election officials, and a police officer interviewed in the film claim that voters who are disloyal to the ruling party may be punished by being denied access to work opportunities, firewood, water, and electricity. In some cases, parents are even threatened that their children might be taken away from them.

According to the investigation, Fidesz is attempting to secure more than half a million votes using these methods, primarily in economically disadvantaged villages in northern and eastern Hungary. These practices are not new, and have been used to maximise the ruling party's vote share over the years. These revelations cast serious shadows over the legitimacy of the electoral system.

The situation might become explosive if the election fails to produce a clear winner. If Fidesz loses by a tight margin, it could challenge the result using the outgoing parliament to overhaul the political system and cement Viktor Orbán's power, presenting it as the only way to avoid chaos. A mob-like assault of the institutions, similar to that carried out by Donald Trump's supporters after the US elections in 2021, cannot be ruled out either.

For the first time in many years, Fidesz seems unable to control the political agenda and communication. The question is whether this will be enough to oust a ruling party that has held power with a two-thirds majority for four consecutive mandates, or whether the predictions of investigative journalists and political experts – who have been warning for months that Orbán's transfer of power will not be smooth – will prove accurate.

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