

Hungary: a pre-election stumble for Fidesz

Andrzej Sadecki

On 25 February, the by-election for mayor of Hódmezővásárhely was won by an independent candidate supported by the whole parliamentary opposition, both the left-liberal and the extreme right (Jobbik) parties. A local conservative activist, Péter Márki-Zay, defeated the candidate of the ruling Fidesz, which had held power in that town continuously since 1997. The largest parties conducted an intense campaign, seeing it as a trial run before the parliamentary elections scheduled for 8 April. According to an opinion poll taken in February by ZRI, the clear front-runner is Fidesz (32%), ahead of Jobbik (11%), the Hungarian Socialist Party (9%), the Democratic Coalition (5%), and the Politics Can Be Different group (4%). About 34% of the respondents stated that they did not know who to vote for, or were not going to vote.

Commentary

- The outcome of the election in Hódmezővásárhely demonstrated that a broad alliance of the whole opposition is able to defeat Fidesz even in places considered to be a bastion of Viktor Orbán's party. This success will induce the left, which has been in a state of crisis for years, to work together with Jobbik in the selection of candidates standing for Parliament in single-mandate districts (Hungary has a mixed electoral law). Such tactical cooperation between the traditionally warring parties has been facilitated by the transformation of Jobbik, which has departed from its previous extreme rhetoric and got rid of its most radical activists. In 2014, Fidesz won 96 of the 106 single-mandate districts with 45% of the vote, as the opposition votes were divided between the candidates of the left-liberal parties and Jobbik.
- The success of the opposition in Hódmezővásárhely came from the mobilisation of a passive electorate, tired of the eight-year rule of Fidesz. The ruling party's candidate obtained a result which reflects the support of the party, whereas the candidate supported by the opposition won thanks to the greater voter turnout (which rose from 36% at the previous election to 62%). The opposition successfully employed anti-corruption slogans, which were supported by a report *from the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) issued just before the election; the report exposed a fraud* in obtaining EU funds involving Prime Minister Orbán's son-in-law, among other matters. At the same time, the outcome of the local elections has shown the limitations of Fidesz's current election strategy. For three years the main theme of the party's narrative has been to 'defend Hungary against immigrants'. Their current campaign is aimed at George Soros, who is

accused of trying to bring migrants to Hungary and controlling the opposition. Fidesz's loss in Hódmezővásárhely has raised a ferment within the party, and in the following weeks we may expect to see a stronger emphasis on a more positive agenda (e.g. almost 4 percent of economic growth).

- A victory for Fidesz in the April elections seems secure, but the party will probably not win the constitutional majority as it did the elections of 2010 and 2014. In a less likely scenario, it might even lose the ability to form a government. Despite the public's fatigue with Fidesz, therefore, the opposition's best hope is to make it difficult for Orban to govern during the next term of office. Fidesz's popularity, which is still high, is influenced by its having more campaign funds than its rivals, as it can draw upon public funding among other sources. For example, the Prime Minister can send letters to all the citizens, and the government can run billboard campaigns; moreover, the government camp controls a vast preponderance of the media (except the internet).