

Electoral triumph for Fidesz, but a difficult term ahead

Andrzej Sadecki

Fidesz's overwhelming victory in the parliamentary elections on 3 April has consolidated its dominance on the Hungarian political scene. The party, which has been in government for twelve years, defeated the united opposition and won a supermajority. Viktor Orbán will become prime minister for the fifth time, and the fourth in a row (his previous terms ran from 1998 to 2002 and from 2010 to 2022). The crushing defeat for the opposition, which had for the first time agreed to run on a joint electoral list and to stand candidates in single-member constituencies, has demonstrated the shortcomings of this model of cooperation. The biggest loser is Jobbik, one of the key members of this bloc. Not only did it win far fewer seats than in previous elections, but the breakaway members of this party – the far-right, pro-Russian Our Homeland party – have entered parliament for the first time. Despite its total political dominance, however, Fidesz is facing a difficult term. Due to the deterioration of the economic situation, the government will not be able to finance the generous social programmes it introduced during the campaign as much as before, and the cooling of relations with its most important partners in the EU and NATO may make it virtually impossible to continue its balancing act in foreign policy, especially since Hungary is keen to maintain access to European funds. Although it is likely to make some adjustments to its stance towards the Ukrainian-Russian war, for the time being Fidesz will not abandon its narrative of a 'neutral' attitude towards the conflict and maintaining economic cooperation with Russia, an approach which contributed to its victory in the elections.

Fidesz wins by a landslide

Fidesz (running in an electoral coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party) won 54% of the vote, which translated into 135 seats in the 199-seat unicameral National Assembly (67.8%) and gave it a supermajority (over 66.6%). The alliance of six opposition parties, United for Hungary, received 34% of the vote and will have 57 deputies (28.6%). The far-right Our Homeland also entered parliament with 6% of the vote, thereby securing 6 seats (3%), and 1 seat will go to the German minority. The turnout was 70%, almost as high as in the 2018 elections.

A referendum on sex education in schools initiated by Fidesz was held in parallel with the elections. Although more than 90% of voters answered 'no' to the four questions on whether or not to allow sexual and gender identity content in school teaching, the result was non-binding as the 50% threshold of valid votes was not reached; around 20% of voters heeded the opposition leaders' call and cast invalid votes.

The key to victory: neutrality, social privileges, media domination

Fidesz's 20-point win over the opposition alliance came as a surprise: even the most optimistic pre-election polls indicated a victory for the ruling party of only 10 percentage points. Orbán's party successfully mobilised its electorate and attracted the votes of the undecided. It won in almost all single-member constituencies where, according to pre-election simulations, support for the two main contenders was similar. In single-member constituencies, compared to the 2018 results, it lost only five seats to the opposition in Budapest and regained one outside the capital. Fidesz recorded the largest increase in support in north-eastern Hungary, a region where Jobbik had previously enjoyed strong popularity. This may have been influenced by the shifts of Fidesz to the right and Jobbik towards the centre which has been visible in recent years. Fidesz left the European People's Party in 2021 and has made attempts to build a new alliance with the European radical right (such as the French National Rally and the Italian Northern League), and began to employ the anti-immigration and anti-LGBT slogans popular with Jobbik's electorate.

The generous social policies of the past few months, which have mitigated the effects of the rising cost of living, also played a key role in the incumbent's victory. These allowed Fidesz to regain its lead over the opposition, which had been leading in the polls for a while last year on a wave of enthusiasm after forming an electoral alliance and conducting a series of primaries. Fidesz's popularity was not hindered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine or Orbán's government long-term involvement in cooperation with Russia. Moreover, it managed to convince a significant part of the electorate that it is the party which guarantees the country's security (both material and existential), and that the best strategy is to 'stay away from war' and avoid taking any confrontational actions towards Moscow.

Calls for Hungary to become more involved in helping Ukraine, made at the end of the campaign by President Volodymyr Zelensky, who personally called on Orbán to change his policy, proved counterproductive. Fidesz has for years portrayed itself as the defender of the country's sovereignty against 'attacks' by foreign media, politicians and international organisations, and managed to convince many that Zelensky's pronouncements should be also seen as interference in the country's internal affairs. This was made easier by the fact that Ukraine had not enjoyed good press in Hungary in recent years due to a dispute over the rights of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. The outbreak of the war has not altered the image of Ukraine much, as the dominant pro-government media have covered it in a rather superficial manner; the Russian crimes are not given much publicity, and in addition, echoes of Kremlin propaganda often appear in them.

Fidesz's exceptionally good electoral results would probably not have been possible without the massive use of state resources in the campaign, as highlighted in this year's preliminary report by OSCE observers (and also in earlier such reports from 2014 and 2018). The party dominates the mass media (about three-quarters of the media market are owned by people linked to the ruling party, and this percentage rose during the last parliamentary term) and had an advantage in terms of campaign spending of about eight-fold. Once again, Fidesz benefitted from the electoral law it adopted back in 2011, whose provisions included gerrymandering constituencies, adding compensatory votes from single-member constituencies to party lists, and granting voting rights to Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries.

The new distribution of seats is particularly favourable for Fidesz. It is once again in a central, dominant position, and the opposition has been split: it now consists of a conglomerate of left-liberal parties and Jobbik on the one hand, and the far-right Our Homeland on the other. With regard to the latter, Orbán will be able to show at home and abroad that, in contrast to these xenophobic and pro-Russian radicals, he is the guarantor of internal stability and – despite everything – of Hungary remaining in the orbit of the West.

Another defeat for the opposition

The election result represents an unequivocal defeat for the opposition alliance, which has failed to carry out even its minimum plan – depriving the ruling camp of its constitutional majority. The feeling of disappointment has been amplified by the high expectations raised by the decision to run together, the successful primaries last autumn, and the lead in the polls which it held for several months in 2021. The opposition only managed to consolidate itself in Budapest (17 out of 18 seats) and maintain its support in Pécs and Szeged. However, the United for Hungary bloc failed to gain seats even in those cities where it won in the last municipal elections in 2019 (such as Miskolc, Eger, Dunaújváros and Szombathely).

The election demonstrated that the creation of an electoral alliance consisting of parties with such diverse political backgrounds not only failed to bring bonus votes, but resulted in the loss of a significant part of their former electorate. In 2018, a total of 2.43 million citizens voted for the six parties, while just 1.95 million voted for their single list in this election, which had a similar turnout. The decisive factor was the outflow of voters from Jobbik, which four years earlier had achieved the best result among the opposition parties. A significant part of its electorate switched their support to Our Homeland or Fidesz, or did not vote at all.

The opposition's main weakness was the lack of a clear electoral offer beyond the shared goal of removing Orbán from power. The individual parties had such diverse profiles – from the centre-right to the liberals, the greens, and the social democrats – that it was difficult for the alliance to present a convincing offer and catchy slogans to the voters which could have competed with Fidesz's clear and consistent message. Disputes between Márki-Zay and the leaders of the Democratic Coalition & Jobbik, as well as the limited involvement of these two parties in the joint campaign, also contributed to the poor result. Although the opposition alliance's prime ministerial candidate brought a freshness to politics and appeared to be a better contender than his rivals in the primaries, he made a number of controversial statements during the campaign.

The opposition now finds itself in a stalemate. The 2018 election showed that when running separately, Fidesz benefits from the fragmentation of votes in single-member districts. This year's election, on the other hand, has highlighted the limitations of the left-leaning parties' approach of running together with Jobbik. We should expect the parties in the alliance to suspend their cooperation at the very least, and that the largest of them (the Democratic Coalition, Jobbik and Momentum) will return to competing with each other. Márki-Zay himself, after his defeat, announced that he was resigning from his seat, putting his previously announced plans to build his own party on hold, and would focus on his job as mayor of the city of Hódmezővásárhely. Of the opposition parties, the Democratic Coalition (16 seats), built around Ferenc Gyurcsány and his wife Klára Dobrev, will have the largest

representation in parliament. However it has little chance of attracting new voters, mainly due to the considerable electoral unpopularity of the former prime minister, who has been one of the main targets of attacks by Fidesz and the pro-government media for years. The third force in parliament will be the centrist Momentum (11), a newcomer to parliament. Founded in 2017, this party has the potential to broaden its electoral base, although it will have to overcome its image of a party of young big-city professionals to do so. The smaller left-wing and green groupings – the Hungarian Socialist Party (10), Dialogue for Hungary (7) and the Hungarian Green Party (4) – seem to have limited opportunities for growth, and will probably try to cooperate among themselves, or gravitate towards the larger parties.

The biggest loser among the opposition parties is Jobbik. It had been the largest opposition force in the previous term with 26 deputies, but now it will be represented by just nine. This party is facing the challenge of redefining its political identity once again. Shifting to a more conventional centre-right position cost it its radical electorate, and the potential to attract disillusioned Fidesz voters proved to be low. By forming an alliance which included forces that were in power before 2010, Jobbik lost the image of a protest party which it tried to maintain even after cutting itself off from its former radicalism.

With the far-right Our Motherland passing the 5 percent threshold, there will be again an unequivocally pro-Russian party in the parliament. Jobbik has largely purged itself of Russian influence in recent years, while Our Fatherland opposes sanctions on Russia, Ukraine's membership of the EU and the stationing of NATO units on Hungarian territory. Its leader justified Russia's aggression after the outbreak of the war, spoke of alleged 'Ukrainian crimes in the Donbas' and the 'humane' behaviour of the Russian military in captured cities. During the election night, he referred to various conspiracy theories promoted by Russia, including about alleged US biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. However, the group primarily owes its good result in the elections to its anti-vaccination slogans, which allowed it to expand its electorate beyond its nationalist base.

Outlook

Fidesz has achieved the best result in its history, but its triumphalism contrasts with the challenges facing the new government. Orbán will have to deal with mounting economic problems and narrowing room for manoeuvre in foreign policy.

The war in Ukraine has shown the limits of the policy of balancing between the West and Russia. Cooperation with Moscow is becoming an increasing burden, and Budapest is facing criticism from even its closest allies in the Visegrád Group. Orbán's post-election statements, however, have not heralded any change in foreign policy. Although at a press conference on 6 April he suggested that it might be necessary to develop a new approach towards Russia, and emphasised his country's attachment to membership of the EU and NATO, the government did not announce any measures reducing co-operation with Moscow. Hungary was the only EU state that did not expel Russian diplomats following the revelation of war crimes in Bucha. Since the outbreak of the war, Hungary has not taken any steps to diversify its supplies of raw materials or strengthen its commitments to NATO (with the exception of agreeing to station a NATO battlegroup, but only in the west of the country). Moreover, the government has expressed its openness to recent Russian demands (such as payment in roubles for raw materials), criticised the EU sanctions on Russia, and opposes extending them to oil and gas. It has maintained its distance from the war and remains

reluctant to condemn the aggressor's crimes (although at the UN they voted to exclude Russia from the Human Rights Council). Orbán condemned the crimes in Bucha only through his spokesman, who did not explicitly name Russia as the perpetrator; meanwhile leading commentators associated with Fidesz have consistently questioned the international media's reports on this issue. One of the foreign minister's first decisions after the election was to summon the Ukrainian ambassador to Budapest in protest at Ukrainian 'interference' in the Hungarian elections.

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the themes on which Orbán built up his political position in Europe (opposition to immigration, social conservatism, gender and LGBT issues, a sovereigntist voice in discussions on the EU's future, etc.) have lost their appeal, and have at least temporarily fallen off the agenda. Just as after 2015 the prime minister's position was one of the main reference points in the discussion on the migration crisis, he now occupies the position of an outsider in discussions on how to deal with Russia and Ukraine. His room for manoeuvre in policy towards China is also shrinking, as the government has encountered increasing public resistance to building closer ties with Beijing in recent years: a project to build a branch of Fudan University in Budapest was halted under the influence of protests, and a referendum initiated by the opposition is to be held on this issue in a few months.

Hungary is experiencing its highest inflation and debt rates in years (the budget deficit for 2021 was 6.8% of GDP, and public debt was 77% of GDP). The government will therefore probably be forced to look for savings and new revenues, as well as to withdraw from some of the costly interventionist measures it introduced before the election in order to mitigate the effects of the high prices of petrol (which is currently frozen at 480 forints per litre, i.e. around €1.30). In view of the mounting political and economic challenges, it seems vital for the government to rebuild the country's position in the EU. Funds from the EU recovery package, which are now especially necessary in the context of the country's economic difficulties, have still not been approved (in March the government announced that, contrary to earlier declarations, it would also apply for loans from this fund). In turn, two days after the elections, the European Commission initiated the so-called rule-of-law conditionality mechanism with regard to Hungary, which could lead to the loss of part of the EU funds assigned for the country.

Orbán has declared that Poland is still Hungary's most important partner in the EU, regardless of their geopolitical divergences. However, Budapest will probably seek support from countries which are opposed to strong reactions to Russia's actions. As for possible changes in its foreign policy, Orbán will probably wait for the results of the elections in France (24 April). Although he is counting on a victory for Marine Le Pen (who received a loan for her campaign from a Hungarian bank which has ties to the government), closer co-operation between the two countries in defence and energy cannot be ruled out even if Emmanuel Macron remains in power (for example, France may take over the project to develop the Paks nuclear power plant from Rosatom, as has already been discussed in the Hungarian press). Orbán has also announced that the new cabinet will not be formed until the end of May, which looks like an attempt to procrastinate before deciding on how to revise the government's policy.