



WILL THE ILLIBERALISM BE FURTHER DEVELOPED IN HUNGARY?

Civil society vs. the Orbán government

Conference report

On the 25th of April 2018 at the joint event of European Liberal Forum and Republikon Foundation “Will the illiberalism be further developed in Hungary? – Civil society vs. the Orbán government” analysts and representatives of the civil society evaluated the 2018 Hungarian parliamentary elections and the prospects for the following years.

In the first part of the conference presentations took place. Ágoston Sámuel Mráz, CEO of Nézőpont Group, Tibor Závecz, director of Závecz Research, Andrea Virág, researcher at Republicon Institute and Zoltán Levente Ember, researcher at Iránytű Institute summarized the conclusions of the election results.

Ágoston Sámuel Mráz admitted being surprised by the third consecutive two-third majority of the governing party. In his opinion the partial failure of tactical voting, the weak and divided opposition, the favourable economic situation and the electoral system are all contributing factors of the Fidesz victory. In terms of consequences he pointed out that this majority gives a mandate to pass qualified majority legislation, make decisions regarding personnel without the opposition and also creates a “legitimate power” to make constitutional changes, however radical steps would only give ammunition to the opposition. Mráz finally added that for the next legislative period demography will be the central issue. Other than public policy questions, attracting young voters and managing a generation change inside the party will all be priorities for Fidesz. When a member of the audience asked whether the 2018 elections were legitimate Mráz stated that the opposition was aware of the electoral system, they also participated, therefore it was a legitimate election.

Tibor Závecz focused on the dilemmas of pollsters. He told that the overestimation of Fidesz support was a long-time empirical experience of the past, and although it might have been true at this elections too, combined with the unpredicted increase in the villages, the over and underestimation neutralized each other. Závecz explained the election results with voting probability, he told that while Fidesz draw in all of its possible supporters (also the Jobbik party and MSZP) opposition parties like the Democratic Coalition produced poor voter turnout, therefore could not maximize their votes. Závecz detailed the effect of the cooperation between the opposition parties. In his opinion the MSZP-DK coordination worked well in Budapest, but on the other hand in the countryside the common candidate got less votes than the two parties list in total, meaning that the pressure for tactical voting confused or deterred some of their supporters. The search for the most probable candidate, and tactical voting between left-wing liberal parties and Jobbik had a similar effect.

Andrea Virág presented the territorial differences of the election results. She claimed that the division is not between Budapest and the countryside but rather between urban and rural constituencies. In Budapest left-wing, liberal parties perform well above their national results, while Fidesz or Jobbik especially reach poorer results compared to other parts of the country. Similarly the democratic opposition is relatively stronger in county seats, Fidesz and Jobbik is weaker in these districts. In contrast, in small villages having only one polling district, opposition parties like MSZP gained far less votes. Consequences of tactical voting were also mentioned, Virág pointed out that in Budapest — where coordination was successful — each party of the democratic opposition performed better on list in those districts where their own candidate ran for the single-member district seat. In her opinion constituents had understood tactical voting, however there were differences between parties in terms of the voters' willingness to practice it.

Zoltán Levente Ember agreed that the territorial differences are mostly based on population size, the smaller the village or town is, residents are more likely to vote for Fidesz. He attributed this phenomenon to “government gestures” (like public work or food stamps) which small benefits make Fidesz a rational choice. Ember also named opinion bubble and general defencelessness as contributing factors that affected especially the older or less educated voters. About Jobbik, he pointed out that since 2014 the party could grow in towns with more than 20.000 residents while it could preserve votes in small villages and became the strongest competition for Fidesz in rural areas. In terms of the future Ember believes that opposition parties need to come up with visions and good narratives which not only focus on rational messages but encourage voters to engage emotionally as well. He t

In the second part the panel discussion focused on the situation and the responsibility of NGOs and civil movements in the lights of the Hungarian Parliamentary Elections held on 8th April 2018. Journalist and activist Réka Kinga Papp, Dániel Mikecz, social movement researcher from Republikon Institute, András Jámbor activist and editor-in-chief of Mércse.hu, Zoltán Lakner, political scientist, assistant professor at Eötvös Loránd University and Júlia Iván, director of Amnesty International in Hungary took part in the panel. The moderator was Dávid Király from Republikon Institute.

Júlia Iván started by declaring that the civil society is always in opposition. Due to their public watchdog role NGOs need to have a critical voice no matter who the government is. She listed the problems of the sector: segmented, underfunded small groups of professionals make up the civil society while there is a lack of contact with the public. On the other hand, NGOs were able to affect the lives of hundred thousands of citizens. Iván believes that education can better the conditions of the civil society. Even young children should be taught about human rights for the present context of forced dichotomies (human rights versus safety or livelihood for example) to change.

Zoltán Lakner said that the regime pushes the civil society into opposition, but after eight years of Fidesz government only the questions are clear. What is the relationship between the government and the civil society like? What is the attitude towards “others”? Questions like these are still unanswered. For party politics he added further ones: Can voter movements become a resource for the parties? Are new parties, figures are expected by voters or they want to see the old ones reformed? What can opposition parties achieve in the Parliament? Lakner explained that it is crucial to decide on these issues in weeks, as in the next four years both the opposition and the civil sector will be faced with growing oppression and narrowing opportunities.

Dániel Mikecz explained the relationship structure of the civil society. There are donors with the necessary financial resources, NGOs who count on these sources and the targeted marginalized groups. He warned that this is a fragile structure because damages suffered NGOs cause far less public outrage than if the society itself financed their work. Mikecz told that the government appoints NGO as opposition because in Hungarian thinking they seem more authentic as opponent than political parties. In his opinion there is reason to be optimistic, as examples of Serbia, Armenia or most recently Slovakia shows that street protest has the potential to cause changes in the government.

Kinga Réka Papp noted that members of the civil society worked faced unfavourable or even hostile conditions even before 2010. She told that small NGOs (service providers in education, care, society building, etc.) operating outside from the spotlite are the greatest victims of anti-civil actions. Papp criticised the politics for ignoring NGOs, in her opinion Jobbik and LMP failed the civil society as they continued this trend despite their civil origins. She declared that it is not the NGOs' responsibility to support political parties, and the only reason why NGOs take up the role of opposition is that parliamentary parties were unable to fulfill their function.

András Jámbor debated Kinga Réka Papp's depiction of the relationship between parties and NGOs. He told that some NGOs have bigger budget than smaller parties. He claimed that the civil sector is treated as a unitary mass, however they differ in many features, for example some NGOs are not allowed to politicize while there are openly political voter movements as well. In his opinion the biggest question are whether the demands of different movements can be channelled into political decisionmaking and whether the the active participation the public can be maintained.

The question of boycotting the Parliament came up in both sections of the conference. Some say that parties of the opposition should not fill in their seats demonstrating that they do not consider the two-third of the government legitimate. At the conference however all speakers agreed that while there is no reason for hoping effective parliamentary work, benefits coming from participating should be exploited. Parliamentary groups receive funding from the state budget, and the MP status also gives unparalleled acces and guarantees, such as making interpellations. Andrea Virág also thought that it is hard to justify and erodes the trust of the voters. András Jámbor added that the question is not whether to sit in, but how the parties can handle their conditions in the Parliament. In his opinion not sitting in would be a gesture but without any meaningful outcome. Kinga Réka Papp declared that the legitimacy which could be undermined by such action no longer exists, therefore it is unnecessary.