

## For some, Jobbik is all that's left

*According to the latest surveys, Jobbik has gained a few percent in the polls. Like the other two parliamentary opposition parties, however, it is still incapable of attracting a sizeable portion of those disappointed in Fidesz. The Roma issue remains relevant but is not a hot topic for the time being. Since Jobbik has little else to say apart from blaming the establishment and tracing back all social ills to one minority or the other, it doesn't appear to be ready to vie seriously for the large pool of undecided voters. Still, lucky circumstances and a bit of work might turn Jobbik into a more serious threat than it is now. Both, the Roma issue and especially the anti-establishment sentiment could gain traction, and with so many voters rejecting MSZP out of hand and still not knowing much about LMP, Jobbik might be the only alternative for some.*

Though neither of the opposition parties has been successful at establishing itself as a clear alternative to the Fidesz-government, Jobbik in particular has appeared rather lacklustre since it went from enfant terrible to sizeable parliamentary party. Especially as a movement that thrived on constant provocation and adeptly challenging the influence of the waning left-liberal elite, it seems positively pallid in the face of a right-wing government that – as Jobbik on occasion grudgingly concedes – often hits all the right notes with Jobbik's voters.

Though recent weeks have shown a slight increase in Jobbik's support, at this stage this is far from a surge. Moreover, all three opposition parties benefit from the fact that Fidesz' base is declining: even if none of these voters opts for a new allegiance, the distribution of certain voters has to tilt slightly more towards those parties whose supporters are not defecting to the undecideds. But the fact remains that in light of several hundred thousand Fidesz supporters going AWOL, the opposition – including Jobbik – remains stunningly ineffectual on every level.

Jobbik wasn't helped by the shift in the focus of the dominant public policy debates. Corruption is – only for the moment – passé, crime isn't felt to be as oppressive as it was a few months ago, while jobs and the economy continue to be the main concern among experts and voters alike. Yes, Jobbik definitely misses MSZP and SZDSZ in power. In so many ways many of the leading left-liberal politicians were the perfect foil for an ambitious and angry radical right party: aloof, distant from the realities of everyday life, awkward and/or hostile towards the symbolic issues of national pride that the Jobbik (and LMP) generation feels passionate about, etc.

### **A regional party?**

No matter what the government says or even does, the situation of Hungary's Roma won't improve in the near future, if ever. That means that the daily conflicts of coexistence and the petty crime associated with a disproportionately (as compared to the non-Roma community) large segment of that community will not go away either.

Fidesz may succeed in driving away some of the overwrought attention on these issues by mandating somewhat oddly that TV news limit their coverage of crime, but the experience



of the past years has shown that this will not be sufficient to convince those people who personally confront the challenges of inter-ethnic coexistence that the problem has disappeared.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that in large swathes of Hungary, notably most of its western parts, the Roma issue is just not that relevant. And as long as the party stands for little apart from seeking to ride the widespread anti-Roma sentiment, it just won't have much to say to those segments of the country who may be genuinely concerned about the issue's impact on the country overall but have little personal experience with it. Jobbik – which incessantly emphasised that the liberal intellectuals lecturing them and their voters about the Roma-issue had no clue what they were talking about for lack of firsthand experience – ought to appreciate this problem better than most. Even if the overwhelmingly conservative voters in northwestern Hungary were inclined to vote for a party to the right of Fidesz – which is a big if –, Jobbik's myopic and substantially thin politicking offers them little reason to do so.

As things stand, if Jobbik manages to survive, which we think is likely, one of the more realistic scenarios is that it will become a bitter (north)eastern regional party fuming about minorities and a distant elite that is incapable of appreciating the concerns of locals. Unless it fails to establish itself as a national party, however, there is no chance of it becoming a serious contender for anything more than an uncomfortable potential junior ally to a Fidesz.

## **Tweaking Jobbik out of the system?**

There are persistent rumours that Fidesz plans to replace our current electoral scheme, which is so complex that far fewer people understand it than talk about it, with a plain first-past-the-post system. For reasons we won't go into now we believe that such a decision could potentially be a crucial and strategic blunder by Fidesz, but in the short term it might be useful in squeezing Jobbik considerably: it is neither an accident nor a wholly cultural phenomenon that in countries with first-past-post extremist parties tend to fare poorly. For voters more concerned about influencing the outcome of the election than making a statement for Jobbik, voting for the radical right would make no sense in large parts of the country.

Even assuming that Jobbik's voters are loyal, however, the fact is that there aren't many constituencies in the country that Jobbik could carry on its own, not even if it garners more votes than in 2014. For a large number of Jobbik's candidates to be competitive at the level of single districts, it would take a surge in the party's popularity of such proportions as is difficult to conceive of for the time being.

Moreover, MSZP, which observed the loss of its eastern base with the passive horror of a drugged junkie watching the police car pull up, may realise one day that its resurgence as a major national party is contingent on recapturing this region. It might consequently be tempted to proffer solutions to the same ethnic problems that Jobbik revels in, though packaging its ethnic approach more carefully as stricter public policies rather than open racism. While Fidesz may suffer most from the squeeze of both parties, an MSZP that successfully channels its former voters' resentments against the Roma will also limit Jobbik's further ascension in the region.

## **It's not all bad for Jobbik though**

Yet there are also reasons for Jobbik to be optimistic. The most obvious one is that Fidesz now appears unable to hold on to the broad coalition of voters that catapulted it to its outsized victory last year. For now, most of the voters that are peeling off the Fidesz-onion are passive in terms of party preference, dejected and/or weighing their options. Many of them will make up their minds at one point, and there is reason to suspect that Jobbik may share in the bounty, maybe even plentifully. There is still considerable anti-establishment feeling in the country and, having decimated one of the established parties in 2010, many voters might feel similarly inclined about the other if the lethal combination of arrogance, corruption and incompetence persist/resurface.

Surveys have shown that for many Fidesz' voters Jobbik would be the second choice, while MSZP is a complete anathema. Odd as it may seem, some of these voters might also consider LMP, but a significant portion would not vote for a bunch of liberal hippies, and even those that might be tempted to do so have thus far been difficult to reach for the green party because of its lack of organisation in large parts of the country.

## **Not a one man show**

Jobbik's other advantage is that unlike many other radical right parties it is not a one man show. In fact, from the outside at least, Gábor Vona appears like a fairly laid back leader. The contrast to two earlier, now de facto defunct parties is illustrative: the Small Landholders (FKgP) and the extremist MIÉP were each led with an iron-fist by charismatic leaders who were regarded as (dangerous) clowns by wide segments of the population, but revered by a small and – at least for a while – loyal base of voters. Once the star of their leader faded, the parties did, too.

Jobbik is different. A number of its politicians are prominent in their own right, complementing Vona, who, unlike the leaders of the abovementioned parties, is very level-headed, though charismatically-challenged. While some of Jobbik's well-known functionaries are harmful clowns, others project seriousness. Still, this is anything but a guarantee of survival: one of MDF's offshoots, MDNP was star-studded with prominent moderate conservative politicians but went under, just as the Centre Party did a few years later.

For Jobbik, the crucial question is still the one we raised a couple of months ago: If it wants to retain or improve its electoral position, it must add some well-rounded policy-heft to its single-minded racism and project more seriousness about politics. Moreover, if it harbours such ambitions, it will have to shed some of the more visible clowns because in spite of the electorate's shift to the right, the majority is not ready to give responsible positions to hooligans (the question is whether Gábor Vona would be strong enough to purge some of the more alarming figures among the party's influential informal youth movement – if he so desired, that is). All this may sound trite, but it does not make it any less true.