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Shifting Political Dynamics and Democratic Disillusionment in Hungary's Political Youth

By Michael Zeller

Politics and governance is increasingly dynamic; development of rapid means of disseminating information, innovation of new modes of political mobilization, and diversification of both has destabilized previously durable political infrastructures.

In democratic states, where political parties and the systems in which they operate have pluralized societies, the effects of these developments are most profound. Party systems in western democracies are fraying from challenges to longstanding parties, both endogenously and exogenously. New forms of constituent mobilization and the further political pluralization of societies facilitated thereby, together, portend at least more electoral volatility, and more menacingly engender the threat of political atomization.

The young democracies of the post-Soviet space are meeting these novelties in a rather different manner, however. Whereas in Western Europe new mobilization tools and culture has overlain the presiding political system, in the East it has grown up alongside the new political order and its party constituents. Hungary exemplifies this dissimilarity. The two foremost Hungarian political parties, *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (or simply Fidesz), along with its alliance partner *Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt* (the Christian Democratic People's Party, or KDNP)[1], and *Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom* (or simply Jobbik) — both products of the post-communist era system[2] — are notable for their prevalent and robust media and mobilization apparatuses. The political socialization that these tools facilitate, particularly among the youth (see Saltman 2014), has produced their current primacy in Hungarian politics.

Yet Hungary is not exempted from the phenomenon of party system shift that has gripped much of Europe. The rise of a far-right party, ideological shift *and* weakening of centrist politics, and forces of consolidation for a new political dynamic — similar to several democracies, these developments have been visited on Hungary. What factors underlay these vicissitudes, what sustained them? This article argues that the right-wing political youth — the dominant sector of Hungary's politically-involved youth, mobilized under the aegis of Fidesz and of Jobbik party organizations — is dismissive of opposition parties, largely disillusioned by the post-Soviet democratic experience and, resultantly, unsupportive of the liberal democratic system. Furthermore, the illiberal regime alterations supported by the right-wing youth, inasmuch as they coincide with and buttress realignment in Hungary's political system, represent a threat to the

unconsolidated democracy of Hungary and exemplify a challenge prevalent across European politics.

In establishing the basis for and advancing this argument, the article excerpts a significant facet from a more thorough examination of right-wing youth politics in Hungary (Zeller 2015). The article first presents in brief the research methods and pertinent literature that informed the original study. Then, an exposition of focus group testimony provides material for a concise analysis of the attitudinal phenomenon that jeopardizes the democratic consolidation of Hungary, and indeed the democratic stability of several European systems.

Literature and Context

My larger study necessarily sought, as have others (Szabó *et al.* 2013, 2015, Saltman 2014), to describe the ideological disposition of Hungary's political youth before analyzing their role in the political system. A highly serviceable construct for identifying and describing the ideological characteristics are Arend Lijphart's (1990^[3]) *dimensions of ideology*, a series of qualitative frames for detailed evaluation of a political system's or subsections ideological makeup.

Lijphart identified seven dimensions observed in democratic systems, including 'regime support.' Essentially, this dimension is understood as a percentage scale wherein complete support for the governing system would represent one-hundred percent and complete opposition zero percent. Though difficult to quantify and subject to numerous qualifications, levels of regime support among electorates, and especially in key sub-populations thereof, form a critical aspect of the life of a liberal democracy.

Even cursory observation of Hungarian political affairs reveals that that dimension is a present and significant element, indeed all the more significant given the adolescence of Hungary's democracy. Recent elections have created and consolidated a new political dynamic in the country, namely, the collapse of the political left and the rise of the new center of political competition, between the right-wing Fidesz party and the far-right Jobbik party.

This shift corresponds to what Scott Flanagan and Russell Dalton (1990) termed 'realignment.' Distinct from the converse phenomenon of 'dealignment,' which depreciates the functionality of political parties, realignment alters party allegiances and results from the forces of segmental (*i.e.* religious, ethnic, and regional divisions) and economic cleavages. Observation of a systematic realignment, and its ongoing consolidation, informed and shaped the larger study from which this article is derived, and which held as a premise the contention that the generation currently coming into political maturity (ages 18 to 30) will play a critical role in determining Hungary's political future.

Methodology

The study conducted focus groups with youth party groups of Fidesz-KDNP (Fidelitas) and Jobbik (*Jobbik Ifjúsági Tagozat*, or Jobbik IT, meaning ‘Jobbik Youth Division’), including ones with Miskolc and Budapest Jobbik IT members and one with Debrecen Fidelitas members. Groups were of the traditional field variety, that is, conducted in-person, directed by an engaged moderator (myself) and with the assistance of a translator. (The same translator was employed for each focus group, thereby eliminating any communicative incongruence from group to group.) Participants were gathered from targeted populations (members of party youth groups) on a voluntary, first-come, first-served basis. The focus groups each lasted an hour and a half to two hours, included six or seven participants aged eighteen to thirty, and were documented with field notes and audio recording.

The interviews were semi-structured and employed a “funnel-based” method, beginning with general questions about participants’ introduction to politics and party affiliation and moving toward more particularized questions (though phrased in such a way to evoke thorough responses) including, for the purposes of this article, inquiries regarding respondents’ ideological dispositions toward the current regime. Participants were asked about their perception of existent corruption, about the transformation from the socialist to the democratic regime, and about the quality of Hungary’s democracy. Moreover, as a matter closely linked to the liberal democratic regime, participants were asked about Hungary’s membership in the European Union. And more generally, the group members’ descriptions of their own party and, crucially, of others — whether there was a so-called ‘loyal opposition’ perspective or rather a staunch conviction that others are illegitimate—revealed much about their assimilation (or lack thereof) of the values of a liberal democratic electorate.

The Case of Hungary

The party system in Hungary is consolidating a political shift. After a term of scandal and mismanagement by a left-wing government, the critical election of 2010 inaugurated the predominance of Fidesz and a new pole of political opposition: Jobbik. While superficially this created bilateral oppositions to the centrally positioned Fidesz, with Jobbik to the right and the recently unseated Socialists to the left, successive election cycles have exposed the left-wing opposition as defunct. Thus the center of political competition lies in the ground between right-wing Fidesz and far-right Jobbik. (It may be noted that this resembles the situation of several other political systems, particularly Poland.)

Serving in the dual offices of engines powering their ascent and of tools securing their long-term viability, Fidesz and Jobbik youth parties play a crucial role in the

evolving nature of Hungary's political system. Their views on the presiding democratic regime, therefore, carry significant implications for the future.

Interviewed Fidesz youth members, unsurprisingly given Fidesz's governmental predominance, were more circumspect and oblique in their critique of Hungary's democratic system. The dynamic figure of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his party are performing well in the wake of adverse conditions (*i.e.* the economic crisis and the inheritance of mismanagement by the preceding Socialist government), the respondents professed. However, viewed holistically, their description of the system, particularly of the late Socialist government (from 2002 to 2010), indicates a latent though undeniable democratic disillusionment.

One respondent's view on corruption, which was echoed by others in the focus group, reveals a particularly interesting facet of regime support, namely, that corruption matters, but in respect of degree rather than mere existence. '*Corruption is a thing that is unavoidable, but on the Left it was too much. They went over the line.*'^[i] More forgiving of scandal, more sympathetic to the means employed to address speedily exigencies of government — such an outlook typifies unromanticized and somewhat resigned view of democratic governance common among Fidelitas members. The boundary between tolerable and excessive corruption is vague, however, and might stand in a different position if other parties were in power. In other words, they trust their party to exercise governmental power with restraint and moderation — even allowing for some minimum of corruption — but not the other parties.

If supporting of any change in the regime, the participants seemed implicitly to validate the systematic predominance^[4] of Fidesz by their regard for the party's moral superiority on one hand, and Jobbik and the Socialist party's philosophical and political inferiority on the other. Fidesz defends Hungary against attempts, particularly by the European Union, to control its economy or trespass on its interests while '*the left-wing are selling out the country to foreign interests.*'^[iii] On the other side, Jobbik cannot be taken seriously as a party, one respondent claimed, since they are '*trying to blame one ethnicity for most of the problems.*'^[iiii]

The other parties, however, are a secondary concern, according to another. The main challengers of Fidesz are rather the '*fake civil societies and associations with left-wing support both from inside and outside the country.*'^[iv] Indeed, the likelihood of foreign support for opposition parties and political forces^[5] rankled the interview participants and, they generally asserted, delegitimized Fidesz's foremost political adversaries. Such a perspective seems implicitly supportive of the 'illiberal democracy' model, which Prime Minister Orbán has articulated and advocated as a means of ordering the state for success (chiefly economically). Mr. Orbán cited China, the Russia under Vladimir Putin, and Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan

as exemplars of such organization. Youth respondents hewed to this explicitly anti-liberal proposal.

A perception of excessive corruption and, they argue, an indefensible regime continuity (from the late socialist regime to the current democratic one) induce a similarly subdued though undeniably sharper degree of regime opposition from the Jobbik youth. “*Still, after 25 years in the [post-Soviet] system, Jobbik is the only party, or almost the only party that was not involved in this changing process...or connected with high corruption in the new leader caste, which is not so new since they were leaders already in the 1980s, so Jobbik is the only big party that is clean from this period.*”^[vi] Jobbik respondents almost uniformly referred to Fidesz and the Socialists as the ‘status quo parties,’ as equally culpable for the failings of Hungarian government over the past two and a half decades and approximately equally corrupt.

Fidesz corruption is so commonplace, said one, that it acquired the faces and names of Mr. 10 or 20 or 30 percent. My translator explained, “When there are public contracts, the state or the city is buying services, building infrastructure—there’s a competition and one company wins, and they get paid. These processes are corrupted. The deciding politicians are called ‘Mr. 30 percent’ because the company that wins has to pay that exact value [of the contract] to the politicians... One of the biggest of these was Lajos Kósa, who was the first person who got publically labeled with this.”

Though corruption is abundant enough to condemn on that basis alone, Jobbik youth members insist that Fidesz is similarly delegitimized by their artificiality. *‘The fake Christian identity of Fidesz with the Christian Democrats [KDNP] is inauthentic because, in the 1990s when Fidesz was more liberal, they were anti-religious, they were criticizing Christians, they were more secular.’*^{[vii], [6]} This imitation serves to highlight Jobbik’s sincere Christian identity. Essentially, Jobbik respondents contended that their genuineness legitimized them and that disingenuousness delegitimized the mainstream parties, which they also termed ‘political whores’ (*“politikai kurvák”*).

Ultimately, the ‘status quo parties’ are beset by corruption and characterized by purposeful or negligent inaction. *‘There are cultural, ethnic, and social problems combined,’* insisted one, not least among them the *‘great and growing extent of deprivation and impoverishment among the society. The political leadership is not interested in solving these problems, since they help the political class stay in power.’*^[viii] The perception of besieging, multi-faceted crises, which have been ignored by the ‘status quo parties,’ defines and shapes the Jobbik youth’s policy positions. Only drastic, only ‘radical’ strategies, they say, can provide effective solutions to Hungary’s problems.

Yet still ‘status quo’ Fidesz stands in the way, according to Jobbik youth. They have impeded Jobbik’s ascension by media smear campaigns and by legal revisions to ensure their political dominance. *‘If [Fidesz-KDNP] hadn’t rewritten the election laws, they would not have a two-thirds majority now!’*^{[vii], [viii]}. The resultant regime disillusionment is distinguished by its resigned tone — “Jobbik IT functions as a political organization that accepts the democratic system we live in, and strives to achieve change within the constraints provided by democracy. Democracy is not the best system, but currently there is no better alternative” (Szabó *et al.*: 2013: 12). This attitude buttresses Jobbik members’ explicitly radical approach to politics. The conviction of necessary radicalism pervades the answers of respondents and accords with a desire for a systematic overhaul, if not outright transformation.

The disposition of regime support among Hungary’s political youth, particularly as it is exemplary of a much wider phenomenon and set of developments, impresses itself directly on numerous facets of society and indirectly on innumerable others; direct inputs to the political system reverberate in spheres of economy, culture, and ostensibly minor quotidian affairs. Notwithstanding the vast scope of repercussions, a few immediately significant conclusions emerge.

First, as in other ideological dimensions, the distance between Fidesz and Jobbik youths is slight in their views of regime support. Perception and toleration of existent corruption explains much of the separation, though that should not obscure the more deeply seated and actuating and shared democratic disillusionment that generates support for regime alteration or transformation from both groups. The youth constituents of Hungary’s two chief political parties are dissatisfied with the workings of post-Soviet democracy; they support their party, but on support for the system in which that party operates they demur.

Second, the political socialization of Hungary’s youth (see Saltman 2014, Zeller 2015) shapes their ideologies, including attitudes toward the presiding regime, and, in concurrence with numerous other illiberal and perhaps anti-democratic forces, is consolidating a political shift in Hungary: the contraction of left-wing support correspondent with a new and principal center of political competition between the right and far-right. This political *realignment* resembles the development of other party systems in Central and Eastern Europe, and contrasts with the *dealignment* (or at least greater variability) occurring in much of Western Europe. But it is not yet clear whether this realignment is durable; the ideological similarity of Fidesz and Jobbik and indeed the lack of regime support suggest fragility.

Worryingly, the tenuousness of Hungary’s political system extends along several fault lines. Party system — is it now and will it remain a predominant, two-party, or multi-party system? Political regime — will ‘illiberal democracy’ or a paradigm of ‘radicalism’ come to characterize Hungary’s government? Regional affiliation — will

it remain in the European Union and the sphere created by other Western supranational organizations or drift into a re-expanded Russian sphere of influence? As ever, today's political youth will exert an outsized influence on these developments as their generation ages into political maturity.

Finally, the phenomenon, of which regime support is only one facet, of attitudinal and ideological challenges to liberal democracy in contemporary European politics is arresting in the way it has disturbed even longstanding systems. In young democratic regimes like Hungary and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, twenty-five years has proven insufficient to establish resilient democracies. Political youth has not been socialized into a healthy democratic system, and without having experienced much or any of the preceding socialist system, thus lacking that comparative frame, it significantly expresses dissatisfaction with the current regime. The engine of youth electorate adherence along with the capacity of new political actors to present plausible viable alternatives to presiding elites and governing systems will continue to nourish the evolving novelties and coincident challenges to liberal democracies. Youth regime support, or lack thereof as seems increasingly common, along with their broader ideological character will have determinative effects on the condition of liberal democracy in Hungary, Europe, and beyond, for better or worse.

Endnotes

[1] Although a formal division still exists between Fidesz and KDNP, the Christian Democrats are unquestionably the junior partner and subservient to and to some extent subsumed under Fidesz. This paper, therefore, deals with the Fidesz-KDNP alliance as one party.

[2] While it was originally founded in 1988, Fidesz, as presently constituted in alliance with KDNP, came into being in 2005. Jobbik was founded in 2003.

[3] Originally described in a 1981 volume entitled *Democracy at the Polls: A Comparative Study of Competitive Elections*.

[4] In several moves since the Fidesz government's inauguration in 2010, they have gone some way toward systematically bolstering their position of power, including a new constitution, revised media regulations, a rewritten electoral code, and alterations to the Constitutional Court and judiciary.

[5] Respondents referenced accusations of foreign (western) financing of Socialist party, the allegations that Gordon Bajnai's Együtt party received support from the Soros Foundation and the Washington-based think-tank Center for American Progress (MNO.hu, 'Az Együtt és Bajnai kusza pénzügyei', 2015), and the ongoing scandal concerning Jobbik MEP Béla Kovács's Russian connections and alleged espionage and service as an intermediary between Jobbik and Putin's regime.

[6] The respondent here cited the a phrase "térdre csuhások," said by Viktor Orbán in the early 1990s to clerics, telling them to kneel and pray in a derogatory manner.

[7] At the time of the focus group, Fidesz had not yet lost the Veszprém by-election, and thus their two-thirds parliamentary majority.

[i] Original response: "...nincs olyan, hogy nincs korrupció, csak azt szoktam mondani, hogy arányokat másképp találják el. Tehát nem mondom, hogy a másik fél feltétlenül rossz, csak az arányok nincsenek eltalálva."

[ii] Original response: "Én még azt tenném hozzá, hogy nagyon kontrasztos és jól észrevehető, hogy a jobboldal, mondjuk a Fidesz, ellentétben a baloldallal a nemzeti érdekeket, értékeket, illetve a nemzet gazdaságát erősíti és védelmezi, míg a baloldal nyolcéves két ciklusa alatt azt láthattuk, hogy nem is azt mondom, hogy kiárusítják, az lehet, hogy erős szó, de abszolút nem kompetensen védik ezeket az értékeket és érdekeket, és inkább a külföldi érdekeknek próbálnak megfelelni."

[iii] Original response: "Erkölcsi okok tekintetében ugye én elég nagy javulást látok a Fideszben is, mióta a KDNP-vel összeolvadt, úgymond. Ennek nagyon örülök, a másik pedig, hogy igazából erkölcsileg ez a legmagasabb szinten álló párt, mert hogy ha megnézzük a többit, a Jobbik is most... nem akarok ebbe nagyon belemenni, de ott is inkább egy-egy adott népcsoportra próbálják ráterelni a problémát, mikor hogy itt szerintem más okok vannak..."

[iv] Original response: "Jelenleg szerintem a kormánynak a legnagyobb ellenfele nem a politikai ellenfelek, hanem az olyan álcivil szervezetek, akiket baloldaliak támogatnak Magyarországról illetve külföldről is sajnos, illetve az olyan média... orgánák, amelyek ugye támadják a kormányt, szerintem most jelenleg ez a legnagyobb politikai ellenfél sajnos..."

[v] Answer given in English.

[vi] Original response: "Az, hogy mennyire keresztény vagy nem keresztény a Fidesz... ugye most a Kereszténydemokrata Néppárttal van együtt, ami mondjuk azt, hogy egy zombi párt... nagyon érdekes, hogy most mekkora keresztények, míg a kilencvenes évek elején a 'térdre csuhások'..."

[vii] Original response: "Amúgy szerintem a legfontosabb mindenképpen a társadalmi problémáknak a megoldása, amik nagyon sok esetben etnikai és kulturális vonatkozásúak is. Szerintem annak a belátásán sok múlhat, illetve az, hogy mikor tudunk elkezdni azzal egyáltalán kezdeni valamit, hogy egy etnikai bombán ülünk...önmagában az a tény a legfontosabb ebben, hogy az eltartottak és az eltartók aránya kezd eltolódní, és hogy ezzel a mindenkori hatalom nem kezd semmit, mert minél több az eltartott, minél több a „mélyigénytelen”, annál olcsóbb a szavazatvásárlás."

[viii] Original response: "És nagyon fontos még annyit hozzátenni ehhez az egészhez, hogy ha nem módosították volna ennyire a választási rendszert is, akkor nem lenne kétharmada most a Fidesznek."