

Why We Lost

Andrew Arato

2022-04-04T18:51:11

April 4 (Hungarian liberation day)

The united opposition in Hungary has suffered a crushing defeat at the parliamentary elections yesterday. Some of my friends and acquaintances will blame for the outcome the new electoral rules produced by Viktor Orbán's government, and his high degree of control over electronic and printed media. They will be wrong, as they often were before. We lost! And by numbers that completely falsify the electoral rule thesis, that suggested in all its versions that the rules give Fidesz 3-5 % advantage.¹⁾ It turns out that there was now a D (index of disproportionality) of 8 % (between votes and mandates). I have counted these for the past, and, relying for the moment on my memory, this D ranged between 6 % and 25 % since 1990. The very high numbers may have been a function of two rounds in the individual races. That would mean that 8 % under the current system with only single rounds is very high. But 18% popular vote difference is pretty remarkable even in that case. Here the D affects only the constitution altering 2/3 majority which Fidesz no longer needs to rely on, not the ability to form government.

The list of Fidesz-KDNP received 53% of the votes, the unified opposition (*Egységben Magyarorszáért*) led by P. Márki-Zay 35%. On top of this 6 % went to "Our Home" (*A Mi Hazánk*), a right-wing breakaway from Jobbik (now part of the opposition), that could have been an (unpleasant) coalition partner for Fidesz, if needed. The media thesis is stronger, and in any case unfalsifiable, but the main stakes that decided the election were well known to any adult Hungarian who can read or talks to someone young who actually does (that is, everyone). And they were: (1) the opposition's incoherent combination of the promise of the restoration of the rule of law at the price of illegality. (2) Putin's war and the opposition (openly supported by the admirable Zelensky) taking an undifferentiated pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian stance. Neither cause alone would have led to an 18 (or 25%) margin, but together (supported by a host of lesser reasons like the [personalities involved](#)) they could and did.

I have a right to point out that I warned against the first of these causes on this very blog. Yes, constitutional change was needed, but to advertise it as *rendszer váltás* (regime change), the term used for the cataclysmic changes of 1989-1990 rather than replacement of a not very popular government, indeed one carried out illegally if necessary (as it would have been), allowed Viktor to claim that a coup (i.e. *autogolpe*) was being planned.

Let me note that the forerunners of today's opposition failed in a spectacular manner in the 1990s to produce a final constitution, and Fidesz could claim, formally rightly, that it is their constitution that completed the regime change, and did so legally (if not legitimately, alas). Now the opposition wanted to do it again, in a society fairly divided by region and ideology. (Amazingly some people, inside and out,

who thought that a final constitution was not needed earlier, have become reborn constitutional revolutionaries now that the country had one, as deficient as it certainly is).

OK, I admit this factor could have caused only a few to shift their possible votes to Fidesz. But Putin's war hugely benefited our Viktor, who knew how to exploit it with the slogan "*Béke és biztonság*" (peace and security)", meaning staying out of the war and refusing to boycott Russian gas and oil. Since these arguments were complicated by the entry of many Ukrainian refugees, and the highly attractive personality of Zelensky, the opposition could have come up with an alternative. Linking Viktor, our Faust, to the demon Vladimir was not it, since just that link could protect Hungary from military and material harm. But to do something else would have required avoiding the demonization of Russia, and seeing the conflict as two-sided (even if without any moral or legal equivalence) requiring negotiation and mutual concessions in order to have a lasting peace all Hungarians probably want. There was no statesman on the opposition's side who could or would do this. Given the war, however, their earlier call for regime change became much more fatal. Hungarians were expected to shift their leadership, and indeed go through the always highly disruptive stage of constitution replacing while the war was unresolved? No thanks.

I voted in NY for the small party Momentum, part of the united opposition, a couple of weeks ago. Even that day I thought rational voters will not vote for the odd man of Europe friendly to Vladimir, now that the Poles have broken with Viktor, at least for the moment. I am still surprised by the lopsided result, that may indeed cost Hungary a lot in the long term. But at war time the voter's time horizon is relatively short. Yes, Orbán is corrupt, the country is a Mafia state, but as my wonderful leftist Hungarian father always said, when voting for Rockefeller in New York State, they have already stolen enough, and new people will of course steal, too. That contrast, of course, could motivate either way. But the most important thing the Hungarian voter thinks about is not corruption, or even European approval, but that Viktor will keep the peace both inside and at our borders.

References

- It turns out that there was now a D (index of disproportionality) of 8 % (between votes and mandates). I have counted these for the past, and, relying for the moment on my memory, this D ranged between 6 % and 25 % since 1990. The very high numbers may have been a function of two rounds in the individual races. That would mean that 8 % under the current system with only single rounds is very high. But 18% popular vote difference is pretty remarkable even in that case. Here the D affects only the constitution altering 2/3 majority which Fidesz no longer needs to rely on, not the ability to form government.

