



Weekly Briefing

Hungary political briefing:
Hungarian Politics in 2020 – The Great Divider: Covid-19 in
Hungarian Politics
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Hungarian Politics in 2020 – The Great Divider: Covid-19 in Hungarian Politics

The December briefings of the China- CEE Institute usually give an overview of the respective year. This analysis summarizes the political events of the year 2020. The ancient Greek word "crisis" means a "turning point in a disease". The term refers to the moment when the patient could either get better or worse. In other words, despite the widely typical connotation of the word, the outcome of a crisis is not necessarily negative, it can be the point at which things take a turn for the better. For the same reason we can argue that the political and economic crisis caused by Covid-19 gives the Hungarian parties the opportunity to benefit from this unexpected situation. It should therefore come as no surprise that during the year the political parties made every effort to change things for the better and to interpret the events in their own favor. The briefing first looks at the main changes in political sympathies over the year, then collects the main themes for 2020.

1. Survey data

Looking at the January and November figures of party sympathies in Hungary, one might have the (misleading) impression that only slight changes took place in the Hungarian politics, but the seemingly unaltered or just slightly worse position of the governing party has undergone significant changes over the course of 2020. The Fidesz-KDNP has politically benefited from the crisis management of the first wave of the Covid-19 virus, according to the figures of Závecz Research, and the party's support improved and was 51 percent among eligible voters and 36 percent among likely voters in August. After this peak of support, the figures started decreasing, which relates to the more severe than anticipated impact of the second wave of the pandemic. As an outcome at the end of the year, the support of the Fidesz-KDNP dropped by 5 percentage points among likely voters while the support among eligible voters grew by 2 percentage points.

At the same time, the opposition camp was slowly but clearly reshaped over the course of the recent months. Both Momentum and the DK could increase the number of their supporters, large advances were made by the DK in whose case the support rose by 3 percentage points among likely voters and 5 percentage points among eligible voters. The increase was

only 1 and 1 percentage point in the case of the Momentum. Other opposition parties could keep their sympathy ratios among likely and eligible voters.

The long-term change that took place in Hungarian politics over the course of 2020 was that opposition parties reached a final agreement on the election cooperation. According to this deal, there will only be a single opposition candidate running for one seat in the Parliamentary Elections in 2022. The obvious goal is not waste ‘votes’ in the fight against each other but concentrate on the competition against the governing party’s candidates.

Taking into account this agreement of the opposition parties, the Fidesz-KDNP’s position is more threatened than ever. A survey which raised the question of whom would the pollees support if choosing between the allied opposition parties and the governing party was conducted by Závecz Research. In August, the Fidesz-KDNP was ahead of the opposition camp by 2 percentage points, but the situation reversed as the opposition camp surpassed the governing party by 3 percentage points in November 2020.

The evaluation of this situation and any kind of forecast is made more complicate by the fact that the Coronavirus-19 pandemic is most likely coming to an end and opinions can swiftly change. The economic impact is here with us, and will stay for months to come, however if the economic indicators show improvement, it would be easier for the governing party to convey their messages and address the public with certain topics.

	Fidesz-KDNP	DK	Momentum	Jobbik	MSZP	LMP	TDP*	Our Homeland**	Dialogue***	Other/Does not know
Eligible voters in January	29	6	6	6	5	2	2	2	1	37
Eligible voters in November	31	11	7	7	5	2	1	1	1	32
Likely voters in January	52	14	10	9	7	3	1	2	1	1
Likely voters in November	47	17	11	10	7	2	2	2	2	0

Source: Závecz Research. * The Two-Tailed Dog Party; ** Mi Hazánk; *** Párbeszéd

2. The main political topics of 2020

The year 2020 began with an assessment of the potential impact of the 2019 local elections, which focused on how Hungarian political parties should change their strategies and

communication in response to the events of 2019. The most important lesson was whether the opposition parties will have a chance to beat the Fidesz-KDNP in the next parliamentary elections and the creation of a common platform for announcing and managing the opposition candidates. The emphasis is on the election, much less what would happen if they won. However, the evaluation process was overshadowed by the outbreak of the global pandemic and its spread in Hungary.

Hungary declared a state of emergency on 11 March 2020 in order to quickly take the necessary decisions that would otherwise have required more time and discussions in parliament. The Human Rights Watchdog (Amnesty International, Helsinki Committee) strongly criticized the draft law, which granted the Hungarian government special right without a given time limit. In addition, the draft law bill was also banded by European politicians and served as a focus of criticism of the Hungarian government. When restrictions on public life and the economic sector were later lifted in certain sectors, the debate quickly subsided.

In recent years it has become clear that the Hungarian political landscape (its issues and tendencies) should be interpreted with an extension to foreign policy issues, especially EU issues, otherwise the dynamics cannot be understood. The governing party defines itself in the context of sovereignty and debates with the party of European Commission, European Parliament and European People. The most intense debate was the one about Fidesz' membership in the party of European People. The party's membership was suspended in February 2020 and the vote on these issues was postponed in October 2020. The issues have not been resolved and it seems as if they could only be solved alongside a package of unresolved problems Fidesz has with the EU. Another related debate revolves around the EU budget and the EU economic recovery plan, which was rejected this month by both Hungary and Poland. The opposing member states refuse to link the budget and the economic recovery plan to an EU regulation that establishes the enforcement of the rule of law in the member states as a prerequisite for the use of funds from the budget and the economic recovery plan. The direct link between these seemingly foreign policy issues and domestic policy is the eagerness of the parties to respond to various elements of these debates and to define themselves along these debates. The Fidesz-KDNP argues that the real reason why Hungary and Poland are being urged to accept the "rule of law" conditions is to break the opposition of these countries on the issue of immigration. According to the Hungarian Prime Minister it is proposed that the European Commission should allow 34 million immigrants to settle in the EU and provide financial assistance and citizenship. Apart from this issue, the Hungarian government is focusing on measures against the negative effects of the coronavirus. In late summer and early autumn, the

government launched a nationwide consultation, which raised questions about the adequacy of Covid-19 measures and possible future actions. In these cases, the Hungarian government is clearly trying to lead and shape public discourse, but there are also cases where it has to deal with issues and events that were not initiated by the government. The most important of these cases was the Szájer scandal, which broke out at the end of November. The politician – member of the European Parliament, and one of the founders of Fidesz – took part in an illegal sex party last week. It is obvious that it is difficult for a party that puts the value of family and tradition above everything to react to this kind of scandal. At this point, we cannot see whether the scandal will significantly impact the support of the governing party or it can remain unscathed.

3. Summary

As we can see, the Covid-19 pandemic has been a real game changer in Hungarian politics, the opportunity given by the disease was used by two opposition parties in term of gains of support, while the governing party has been more successful in the first half of the year than in the second year. As we understand it, if recent tendencies continue in domestic politics, a further concentration of political power in the opposition camp is to be expected in the months to come, while the most likely end of the pandemic will also give new opportunities for the Fidesz-KDNP to redefine its messages, and prepare for the growing tensions in EU relations.