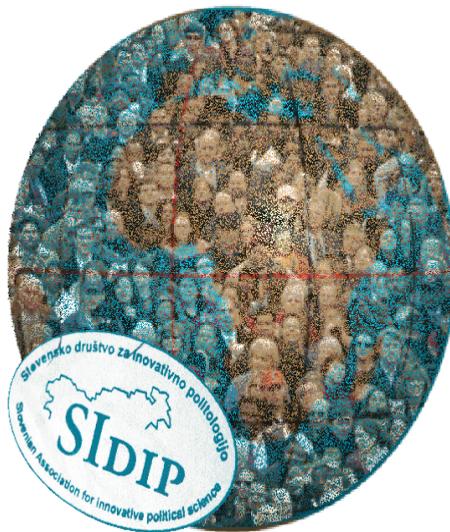


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SMER-SD and FIDESZ: The National Interests and Populism in the 2010 Parliamentary Elections

Peter Horváth³

Jaroslav Mihálik⁴

Abstract

The paper explores two major political parties, FIDESZ in Hungary and SMER-SD in Slovakia and their success in the latest parliamentary elections from the comparative perspective.

The year 2010 was known as the elections' year in the region of Central Europe. Apart from the possible changes of the governing elites there is a specific pressure in the communication strategies to strengthen the national issues and questions related to common history of the former post-war period when the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy dissolved and new sovereign states were created. Thus, the central concepts are not to fight the economic crisis, to improve the social status of citizens, unemployment, but the protection of national interests, historical grievances and its violent removal through the prism of electoral populism. It seems that the political elites are moving backwards in time and do not reflect the real existing needs of the citizens they govern. Although both countries are members of the EU

³ Director of the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovakia

⁴ Assistant lecturer at UCM Trnava; Ph.D. candidate at Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences at Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia

and NATO, elections in April and June 2010 do not create proper conditions for good relations between these two countries.

Key words: *parliamentary elections, populism, nationalism, Fidesz, Smer – SD*

Introduction

If we would like to study the concept of Central Europe in our article, it is necessary to define this region at first. It is an expression for the region, which is seen differently from the territorial view, from the perspective of the continental Europe, and observed differently from the perspective outside of Europe. Let us cut the various geopolitical aspects and the theories to go directly to the region and view it as a community of four countries, working together in a cluster of the Visegrad group, which was launched at a formal meeting of presidents of three Central European countries on 15th February 1991 at an ancient castle of Visegrad in Hungary. Signatures of the three high constitutional officials created the only group, but also the definition of the region, which is formed together by the Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Hungary and Poland. These four sovereign states have always shown the effort to strengthen the common cultural and intellectual values with the continuous wish to keep and preserve such cooperation. Although each of the countries reached the long time goal to become a member state of the European Union, the V4 group does not create an alternative to the economic and defense efforts of the EU.⁵

The year 2010 conducted several types of elections in these countries. This significant match, not only in the scope of parliamentary elections, is due to the fact that the Czech Republic, Slovakia and

⁵ More about the Visegrad 4 cooperation at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=858>

Hungary experienced the first free elections in 1990, the Poles a year later. From the perspective of our article it is important to stress that we will predominantly deal with two countries of the Central Europe, Hungary and Slovakia, and our focus will be shaped by investigating the political parties that won the 2010 elections.

In spite of the fact that the elections in Slovakia and Hungary have been won by the political entities that far exceeded their political opponents, it is necessary to give adequate space for analysis and comparison of elements and factors, primarily the political profiles of these entities to be relevant to consider the similarities and differences of these political parties and highlight the possible risks arising from the electoral rhetoric. Thus, our study covers the comparison of two entities, the political party SMER - Social Democracy (SMER - SD) and Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union. We introduce these parties as electoral leaders, we identify the common and diverse characteristics and use the results to clarify that the dilemmas of ethnicity and nationalism are still valid for the region of Central Europe.

A short discourse from the theoretical framework of political parties

From the theoretical point of view both examined political parties are not fundamentally different from each other. Both have built their national structures, both have a respected leader at its frontline who is, in principle, the founder of the political entity. According to the Kirchheimer's classification of political parties, SMER – SD as well as Fidesz belong to the group of so-called "catch-all parties" (Kirchheimer, 1966: 177-200). These parties are inherently interested in mobilizing the widest range of constituents at the costs of loosening their ideological concepts. Let's consider the categorization of these parties by the

Czech political scientist, Maximilián Strmiska with regard on his publication *The Political Parties in Modern Europe*.

Smer – Social Democracy

This party was founded in 1999 by a distinguished politician of former communist Party of Democratic Left (SDL), Robert Fico. At the beginning the party claimed itself as a “third way”, similarly to the Scandinavian political entities (Rešetka, 2010). Smer - SD has transformed itself according to several professional expectations (Hynčica, 2007) from previously unclear political profile of the party, into a social democratic identity, while retaining some elements of the original identity.⁶ A political scientist, Svetozár Krno argues that Smer emerged as a non-standard criticist (Krno, 2007: 283)⁷ platform with a clear media vision created upon the initiative of popular MP who has ever since been at the top level of people’s choice. Assumptions on the leftist shift were evident: the leader came from the leftist SDL and Smer also absorbed and united former leftist parties and their representatives, who used a massive membership in this political entity. The leftist political ideology was confirmed during the election period 2002 – 2006 (the second term of Mikulas Dzurinda), when in power the so-called right-wing coalition adopted variety of unpopular reforms lowering the social standard of many citizens.

SMER is identified with strong social rhetoric and the idea of the welfare state, which together with the charismatic appearance in the person of Robert Fico helped to triumphant victory in the election of

⁶ Mostly by using anti-elite, protestant appeal. Strmiska, M. (2005): *The Political Parties in Modern Europe*. Praha: Portal, p. 473

⁷ Apart from journalists also the analysts often used this term during the third Meciar government. The problem of its frequent use was not only in defining what is standard but morelikely the word could not be use to characterize the political entity from the position of neutral objective scientist, but to identify the negativism and ostracism. See more Krno, S. (2007): *Politické strany štátov Visegrádskej štvorky*. Nitra: UKF, p. 283

2006. Nevertheless, Smer paid the price for irresponsible choice of coalition partners, notably the Slovak National Party (SNS), for which it was expressed resentment and suspended Smer's membership in the Party of European Socialists represented in the European Parliament (Rešetka, 2010). The campaigning of the party strengthened statist concepts, the need of geopolitical and energetic vision of Slovakia, the legal state, economic liberalism, social issues. Smer – SD criticized the conditions of state accession to the EU but did not argue against the accession itself (Krno, 2007: 283-284). As Viera Žuborová observes in her study about the negative campaign in 2010 parliamentary elections: “...the position and the impact of voter mobilization and demobilization through (positive) negative ads in the campaign period shall not fade the political position of Smer, but this party will be able to dictate the ads of the whole party system in Slovakia.” The best example according to the author is the term *welfare state* that started to be very frequent in the political agendas of major part of the political parties (Žúborová, 2011: 79). The typically left wing parties are mostly recognized as significant in the procedures to guarantee the minority rights and adhere the citizenship status of such groups or vice versa; socialists try to emphasize the status of ethnic minorities. In this case Smer – SD reacted very moderately, let's consider that the goal of the minority policy making was to prevent the status quo which is not enough for such left oriented political subject. We have to deemphasize the political agenda of Smer in the scope of minority policy – the mutual relations with Hungary were paradoxically worsened during the governmental period of Smer – SNS - HZDS coalition.⁸ During the electoral period when party Smer was a dominant political actor further laws were adopted from the political agenda of Slovak National Party with a strong support of MPs representing the major coalition partner. We can easily

⁸ The typical negative course is seen in the adoption of Language law in 2009.

confirm the adoption of such laws as “national”. Perhaps, the law itself carries out some logic content but the timing of the adoption is at least very wrong, causing the radicalization of the opposite camp which will be discussed later. These and many others controversial agenda settings clarified that the party Smer does not stand as a standard left orientation party (Rešetka, 2010).⁹

If we consider the profile of Smer – SD from the perspective of the national issues it is evident that it does not act and behave as a standardized social democracy, but mainly as a party with a nationalist accent that avoids addressing the actual minority discourses. Similarly, a political scientist Grigorij Mesežnikov notes that the right-oriented SNS draws its coalition potential from the power position of the other “nationally” oriented political parties such as Smer and HZDS. The part of this argument is a historical experience that the moderate center right and center left political parties had never claimed the political will to create a government coalition with nationalists (Mesežnikov, 2009: 28). The same inconsistency is visible also in economic or socio-economic agenda – during the ruling period of Smer. There was no tax raising which is typical for Nordic left political parties. Furthermore the cultural-ethical question was practically ignored by a leading party in the electoral period 2006 – 2010. In the scope of rhetoric - there are significant signs of left populism to trivial the major issues to the unworkable procedures. The last area that is evaluated is the international relations which was more or less pathetic during the previous four years.

One of the most significant characteristics for the “catch-all” party Smer – SD is that the electorate or the constituents are mobilized not

⁹ Further analysis of such controversial left orientation is available In Rešetka, L. (2010): *Komparácia politických subjektov Smer a Fidesz*.

only on the left wing of the political spectrum but also in nationally oriented voters and conservative vote takers.

Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union

Political party Fidesz was founded by young intellectuals and students in 1988 and was subsequently registered as a youth organization. Only in 1993, it was transformed to a real political party. As stated by Svetozár Krno, the party is considered to be virtually the only successful European entity based on the generational principle and which was only cancelled during the party transformation and no longer required the membership condition of the age less than 35 years (Krno, 2007: 139). Such census was atypical not only within the scope of the Central Europe but also rare globally. Almost as complicated journey was made across the ideological and programmatic content of the party. The current Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, has been chosen to lead party since 1993, when the party began to change from the classic liberal cosmopolitan oriented formation into the national conservative center-right party. Following the first free election Fidesz has become the political party represented in the national parliament. The party emphasizes the role of the family and its harmonious development; which is also implemented in supporting an adequate fiscal policy and tax law. The economic agenda is virtually in the frame of a liberal orientation. Interesting memento is a strong emphasis on environmental policy. Apart from that the program is strongly populist, for example, raising the question of pensions, free education and others. Cultural and social identity is largely affected by the protection of the Hungarian language and culture and emphasis on the role of churches in public life. The party successfully supports Hungary's membership in NATO and EU (Strmiska, 2005: 492-493). The very first significant success was proclaimed in 1998, when Fidesz got into the government together with

the Hungarian Democratic Forum and the Peasant Party and the Prime Minister has become a charismatic leader, Viktor Orban. Besides increasing the public deficit the dominant theme was the protection of the rights of Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries or, in other words, former territories of Hungarian hegemony. These activities, however, caused a wave of resentment in neighboring countries. Problem has arisen particularly with the question of dual citizenship of Hungarians living abroad which, secondarily, ought to provide also material assistance. In the second half of the electoral period 2006 - 2010 Fidesz largely supported the anti-government demonstrations and demanded resignation of socialist Prime Minister Gyurcsany. The party declared in a time of economic crisis and the threat of national bankruptcy that it will not allow the ordinary citizens to suffer due to poor economic situation. At the same time the party strongly asserted slogans such as "Hungary for Hungarians", thereby emphasizing the patronage of the state and suggested statist conservative style of government. This term was also underlined by the nationalist rhetoric and characteristic deterioration of relations between the Slovaks and Hungarians. The emerging nationalist passions fueled the expansion of political entities, which can be attributed to the extreme right-wing (eg Jobbik Party - Movement for a Better Hungary), which, however, collected a significant proportion of the electorate of Fidesz. During the turbulent years of the political opposition, Fidesz significantly strengthened so much that in July 2010 parliamentary elections the party reached a constitutional majority. Obtaining such majority basically confirmed that Fidesz is not required to officially identify with radical Jobbik, while not doing compromise in the compound of the government with socialists. Fidesz has succeeded with ideal electoral outcome, which means that the party can actually establish any political changes, or the transformation of the entire political system may occur in extreme case. By the complex

transformation of the political party Fidesz it is obvious about declaring it as a “catch-all party.” We will try to figure it out on the electorate support. According to statistics data the typical voter of the party is a nationally oriented constituent (due to the nationalist rhetoric), conservative voter (due to great relations with the church and supporting of the traditional values), and socialist (due to populist rhetoric which is obviously more left than classic socialist party). Some authors are investigating the background of the right and far right parties success on the Roma (gypsy) population. The author concludes that although Fidesz used propagandist rhetoric during and before the campaign regarding reducing benefits to Roma population and including them to community work, it never went into such extremes as Jobbik did. There have been racist incidents all over 2009, murders and revenges therefore the election results are really not surprising (Wolf, 2010).

Making conclusions from the basic characteristics of the two major political parties of both Slovakia and Hungary is clear that apart from the international engagement in which Fidesz is relatively active, the profile of Smer – SD and Fidesz is quite common and we can find similar elements even if the parties are politically on the different side of the classic political spectrum.

The comparative perspective

In terms of comparative perspective, it is interesting to identify the common elements of both subjects observed. In particular, it is necessary to declare that both parties benefit in particular from leaders who are charismatic personalities of Robert Fico and Viktor Orban. Both retain broad support in the public polls.¹⁰ Another phenomenon is the

¹⁰ The leader of the strongest parliamentary group, R. Fico gains permanent trust from people around 40 %. <http://www.infolby.sk/index.php?base=data/pvm/uvvm/0902180298.msg>

identical question of populism, where both sides expressed a consensus in relation to the public. Interesting is also to monitor their position in the main use of expressive and nationalist statements. Both players managed to mobilize the largest number of constituents and this trend seems to be continuous (Hanley, Szczerbiak, Haughton, Fowler, 2008: 422). A special interest is also paid to a common feature of the development process of these entities. While Smer has transformed from the so-called "third way party", or initially from the side of the centrist group to typically leftist, Fidesz has evolved from the liberal-oriented party with a young intelligence base into a national conservative party with the rhetoric that is assumed by more radically oriented political parties of the far right. Both entities are significantly identified with the issues in Slovakia - Hungarian relations and at the same time they stress out a possible cooperation with the parties with nationalist context. Here it is necessary to emphasize that Smer as well as Fidesz are tempted to change the electoral system to national parliaments to the majoritarian system, which would thus favor the powerful and successful actors such as these parties. In the following part of the study the electoral theory of the observed countries is illustrated.

According to theories of the electoral systems, the mixed proportional system¹¹ tends to help smaller political entities at the expense of major political parties. In contrast, the majoritarian electoral system¹² does not automatically prefer the largest political party to win absolute majority, but helps doing so much more than in the previous case. If we chose to analyze the impact of the majoritarian mixed electoral system for Hungary, it is possible to confirm that the mixed electoral system tends

¹¹ MMP – Mixed Member Proportional. See for example Sartori, G. (2001), Shugart, M.S. – Wattenberg, M.P. (2001): *Mixed Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds*. Oxford University Press., Massicotte, Blais (1999): *Mixed Electoral Systems: A Conceptual and Empirical Survey*. Electoral Studies XVIII

¹² MMM – Mixed Member Majoritarian. See *ibid*.

to create bipolar party system. In the case of the Hungarian party system, there is a switching constant of taking the government positions by the two dominant political parties. It is important to note that the discussed set of the electoral system to the Hungarian Parliament has played a significant role in the transition to democracy (Ženíšek, 2004: 44-48). The last observed parliamentary elections have confirmed such theory. The Hungarian electoral system contributes to the results, which successfully deny two essential criteria imposed on the election rules: the emergence of a representative legislature from the electoral battle and the creation of a representative and capable government. The different position of Smer - SD and Fidesz, despite the fact that they won the parliamentary elections in 2010 is largely a reflection of the electoral system in that country. While in Slovakia operates a very typical proportional electoral system, in Hungary is supermixed electoral system that favors the winner of the election. The Hungarian case probably stands for the European most complicated electoral law (Chytilík, Šedo, 2004: 155). The system is a hybrid using elections from a combination of single-member districts, party lists, and a national compensation list (Benoit, 2005: 243). As the author observes: „It would not be an exaggeration to state that Hungary’s electoral system was created for the parties, by the parties, and of the parties“ (Rešetka, 2010).

If we look at both political parties in terms of different characteristics we find that these are not in terms of real political performance in principle. In particular, we note that Smer is the party proclaimed as leftist or center-left (see description) while Hungarian counterpart is currently a great example of the center-right or right wing. This fact is largely verifiable by the membership of those entities in the European Parliament – Fidesz is a member of the European People's Party and Smer belongs among the European socialists. In view of the divergent elements, it is very interesting to follow the increase of the

preferences and popularity in the conditions of mobilizing the electorate. Paradoxically, Fidesz has reached its electoral peak in the time when they were in opposition (term from 2006 to 2010) and Smer maximized their electoral potential to the historical level while in the ruling coalition in the same reported period (Rešetka, 2010). According to mentioned above we are able to confirm the hypothesis that these two political entities are in essence far more similar than diverse even since they are at different poles of the political spectrum. Their national-state interests and issues of Slovak - Hungarian relations, the ideological background and the way they exercise the political power and almost mass mobilization of voters composed the elements on which we can declare a certain similarity. Similar features can be also found in the frequent use of populism, which in many cases is a nationalist populism (see the Language Act, Patriot Act, the question of dual citizenship and others). Despite efforts to formally proclaim and publicly distance themselves from extremist political parties, we can not confirm that as the Slovak National Party and the Hungarian Jobbik do not play or did not play a major influence in shaping the government policy.

Conclusions

In both investigated countries, political parties that stand in the ideological perceptions on different sides won the latest parliamentary elections. While Smer-SD is a vector of left-wing ideas, the right-wing Fidesz is obviously a constant on the Hungarian political spectrum. Although their situation is different after the last elections - one ended up in opposition, the second compiled the government itself, they are still the crucial actors in terms of setting up and bringing the issues they live by, and, at the same time they create the harsh political atmosphere. Although they are not the most radical groups in their countries in the

way of the far right groups, they currently have a significant word in their "ventilation". On the Slovak side is the most radical Slovak National Party, which, even in its electoral manifesto had the recurrent connections with the "Hungarian threat" or "Hungarian card". In the mutual relations the expression of SNS are highly confrontational and political scientist G. Mesežnikov called them to be paranoid (Mesežnikov, 2010).

From the other point of view, the Hungarian problem number 1 is called Jobbik. The sources of spreading information for Jobbik are primarily the social networks that have boomed lately and the Internet itself. Thus, even in the age category 18-24 of the young voters, this group has twice the support as former ruling Hungarian Socialists. Jobbik impresses the youth with its vigor and radicalism. According to research conducted by European Social Survey Hungary is on the 3rd place in the inclination of the population to right-wing radicalism (Klimša, 2010). One fifth of the Hungarian population sympathize with the extremist right. Although Fidesz clearly declared before the elections, and finally even met this declaration, that the government would never be created with Jobbik, the real problem has already emerged in the society. The biggest electoral breakthrough was for Jobbik with its strong extremist anti-semitic and anti-gypsy rhetoric (Traynor, 2010) while there is a real threat of the extremist forces to gain more power in Hungary. Jobbik is in close relation with the Hungarian Garda that has previously been declared as illegal and has been banned (Wolf, 2010).

SMER-SD and Fidesz are still the most influential political parties that affect the process in either a positive or a negative manner. It will probably be those common features which we have already elsewhere mentioned above:

- Charismatic leaders on both sides who realize that the image of the external enemy is too convenient for them as a positive factor for the

dominant effect and they are informed that any kind of turnover in the perception of them could worsen their reputation and renome and cause some serious harm.

- they use the national issues at every opportunity such as strong position directed against the other party - in this situation, if the European Parliament and their own political countrymen at the other political platforms shall tolerate such negative messaging, the question of improving the mutual relations remains unanswered

It remains only to believe that during the current legislative period, both political parties will find enough space to search for compromises. Nevertheless, we believe that Western European countries cannot allow more than thousand years neighbors to unleash such hell that happened in the Balkans in the '90s. In addition to external factors, the situation is positively affected by various elements of civil (open) society. Our task will therefore lie in continuous monitoring of the parties over time and bringing up a report on their positive impact in the future. If we add the current heads of both states, it is hard to imagine that the development would go right through the Balkans history. Although it should also be noted that at the beginning of the Balkan war, only few predicted the later scenario. Let this memento be in mind for the future generations.

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Annex

April 11-25, 2010 National Assembly Election Results - Hungary Totals

	First Round	Second Round
Registered Electors	8,034,394	2,486,111
Voters	5,172,222 64.4%	1,160,117 46.7%

	Single-Member Constituencies		Regional Constituencies	
Invalid Ballots	55,428 1.1%	7,118 0.6%	37,908 0.7%	
Valid Votes	5,114,570 98.9%	1,152,693 99.4%	5,132,531 99.3%	

Party	First Round Votes	%	Second Round Votes	%	Single-Member Seats	List Votes	%	List Seats	National List Seats	Total Seats
Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union-KDNP	2,732,965	53.4	620,232	53.8	172	2,706,292	52.7	87	3	262
Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP)	1,088,374	21.3	326,361	28.3	2	990,428	19.3	28	29	59
Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik)	836,774	16.4	141,415	12.3	0	855,436	16.7	26	21	47
Politics Can Be Different (LMP)	259,220	5.1	43,437	3.8	0	383,876	7.5	5	11	16
Fidesz-KDNP-MYMP joint candidate	10,661	0.2	8,796	0.8	1	-	-	-	-	1
Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF)	72,768	1.4	-	-	0	136,895	2.7	0	0	0
MDF-SZDSZ joint candidates	12,652	0.2	-	-	0	-	-	-	-	0
Association for Somogy	7,470	0.1	-	-	0	-	-	-	-	0
Others	93,686	1.8	12,452	1.1	1	59,604	1.2	0	0	1

Source: <http://electionresources.org/hu/assembly.php?election=2010>

June 12, 2010 National Council Election Results - Slovakia Totals

Registered Electors	4,362,369	
Voters Obtaining Envelopes	2,566,779	58.8%
Delivered Envelopes	2,564,426	
Valid Votes	2,529,385	98.6%

Party	Votes	%	Seats
Direction - Social Democracy (SMER)	880,111	34.8	62
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union - Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS)	390,042	15.4	28
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	307,287	12.1	22
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	215,755	8.5	15
MOST - HÍD	205,538	8.1	14
Slovak National Party (SNS)	128,490	5.1	9
Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK-MKP)	109,638	4.3	0
People's Party - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS)	109,480	4.3	0
Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)	21,104	0.8	0
Others	161,940	6.4	0

Source: <http://electionresources.org/sk/nrsr.php?election=2010>