

A friend of mine asked: **Why Orbán is so strong?**

I wrote the following:

1. Orbán has been the leader of the strongest political party since about 2000. Indeed, there has been an 8 year period in between (2002-10) when he was in opposition, but in those cases the Socialists only managed to win by being the strongest party for a few months (in both 2002 and 2006). In the early and mid 1990s the Centre Right was fragmented in Hungary, and Orbán united them and they (the conservative upper and middle classes) mostly want to remain united behind Orbán (now in 2018 we see some change in this but not really significant).
2. Orbán managed to unite the Right because he has had a political economy agenda, i.e. to correct the imbalances of the economic transition to the market system, which created excessive foreign ownership in Hungary. This is a long-term program, unfinished and unfinishable, and helps forging a long-term commitment to the leader on the Right. Originally this was the program of the far Right which Orbán turned into the program of the centre Right. Economic nationalism is a core issue of Fidesz.
3. Orbán created cultural hegemony by occupying and expropriating some themes that resonate with a lot of Hungarians, like support for minority Hungarians in neighbouring countries, support for sports (especially football and the Puskás legacy, but also Olympics), and the memory 1956, which they use in a manipulative way but never mind. Religion is also important: there is a strong correlation between those who believe in God and those who believe in Orbán.
4. Orbán was lucky to have the general elections in 2010 when people felt the fallout from the global financial crisis of 2008-9. This was bad for incumbents everywhere but it allowed Orbán to achieve 2/3 majority in parliament which he used to change the constitution (which was not talked about before the election, so it was not a promise or something people would have expected). He started to change the rules of the game in order to eliminate the tools he had used to get into power.
5. The 2010 defeat practically eliminated the Free Democrats and heavily damaged the Socialist Party which had been the strongest party in 4 elections since 1990 (in 94, 98, 02 and 06). A split in 2011 further weakened the Socialists, which also were haunted by the image of economic incompetence (partly deserved) and corruption (often exaggerated). The fragmentation of the Centre and Left (there was also a split among the Greens and some start-up parties emerged in the middle) helped Orbán to another 2/3 majority in 2014 (even if in this case he only had 1 more mandate than necessary for constitutional majority, which he later lost after a by-election).
6. In 2010 Orbán knew that he would lose support after a while and he used his 2/3 majority to reorganise the political system. He changed the electoral law and made it even more disproportional than it had been before (abolishing first round, gerrymandering etc.). He brought state media under his control, gave citizenship to Hungarians living in neighbouring countries and allowed them to vote in mail, which was not given to Hungarians who have residence in HU but work in the UK or elsewhere abroad. Checks and balances on executive power were diminished. Financial incentives were installed in order to stimulate the creation of bogus parties to ensure that some anti-government vote actually goes to waste.

7. After 2014, in his 2nd mandate he went further. His cronies acquired vast shares in private (printed and electronic) media, which practically means that the opposition voices and views have very limited chance to reach the rural population. Orbán got the main political (Left-Liberal) broadsheet of the country (*Népszabadság*) closed and he has launched a witch hunt against civil society, especially those exposing corruption. Intimidation goes to extremes when opposition candidates or their relatives can just be sacked from their jobs. Astronomic amounts from the state budget go into Fidesz propaganda and brain washing. The State Audit Office has imposed an arbitrary fine on opposition parties etc.etc. Elsewhere dirty tricks may occur, but for Fidesz dirty tricks became the norm.
8. The 2015 refugee crisis came handy to Orbán and he managed to exploit the fear from migrants to the full. The anti-migrant hysteria in the last 3 years has been unprecedented and it plays an important role in keeping together the 2.0—2.3 million voting base of Orbán. Those who protested the inhuman treatment of refugees were considered as enemies and Orbán started to suppress civic activity on the grounds of national security. In Fidesz propaganda, Hungary is under attack from those who want to flood us with (Muslim) immigrants: Brussels, George Soros and the United Nations, which can only be stopped if he remains in power.
9. The European Peoples' Party has provided cover for Orbán. Despite dismantling the rule of law in an EU member state, the EPP has protected him in order to avoid losing a member and in exchange of the economic and political favours (e.g. to German business in Hungary like Audi, Deutsche Telekom etc.). The German CSU has played a pivotal role in whitewashing the autocratic rule of Orbán, and only pushed him back in cases when he was going to the wildest extremes like discussing the need to re-introduce death penalty. Orbán has also pleased his German allies by being a championing fiscal austerity, in contrast with the previous period when Hungary struggled with excessive deficits.
10. Many in Hungary, including opposition politicians lost hope and started to play for mere survival and a place in Parliament, instead of changing the government. Orbán has successfully played divide and rule with the opposition, but many old and new figures played into his hand. Various opportunities to form a more united opposition were missed, and the opposition arrived to the 2018 elections in a fragmented state, leaving many voters with the puzzle to find out whom to vote for. Since 2011, hundreds of thousands who lost hope have left the country and this trend will continue if Orbán stays in power.

However: while first party preferences have been frozen for some time (and Fidesz remains the strongest party by far), in this election 2nd preferences and tactical voting will play a big part. The strong rejection of Fidesz by the majority reduced or even eliminated the electoral shyness and in constituencies some centre-left voters will vote Jobbik (formerly known as the Far-Right party of Hungary) if needed and perhaps also vice versa. This will make the race tighter.

Out of 199 mandates, 106 will be decided in districts (first past the post system). According to the V18 electoral movement (www.v18.eu) there is a chance to defeat Fidesz in 53 constituencies, out of which there is a strong chance in 30-40. The remaining 93 seats are allocated according to votes on party lists

and there Fidesz will get around 40-42 %. (Votes on those not reaching the 5 % threshold will be distributed among those above 5 % according to their vote shares.)

The most likely outcome still is that Fidesz retains absolute majority, Jobbik comes 2nd but the combined centre left will be stronger in parliament than Jobbik. Due to uncertainties of participation and tactical voting at district level, practically anything can happen between another 2/3 majority of Fidesz and Fidesz falling slightly below 50 %.

Some say either we get a new government or a new opposition after Sunday. This means in case of opposition failure Jobbik would soon elect a new leader and some major consolidation would come on the centre-left. The latter would be necessary anyhow and in a way the renewal of the centre-left has already started in this campaign period by establishing an electoral alliance between the Socialists and the Párbeszéd (Left Greens) under the leadership of Gergely Karácsony and Ágnes Kunhalmi.