

Socialist coalition prepares Hungary for entry into European Union following election

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1 May 2002

On April 21, the second round of the Hungarian parliamentary elections took place. As already apparent from the results of the first poll a week earlier, incumbent Prime Minister Viktor Orban of the right-wing conservative Fidesz Party (Association of Young Democrats) has lost his majority in the new parliament. Although the Fidesz in alliance with the Democratic Forum (MDF) took most of the votes, winning 45 percent of all votes cast, the former opposition socialists (MSZP) and liberal Association of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) have managed to effect a transition of power.

With 43.7 and 4.4 percent of the votes respectively, the MSZP and SZDSZ have together gained 10 more parliamentary seats than Fidesz. The formation of a coalition government is widely regarded as a certainty. The Party of Small Farmers (FKGP) and the ultra-right Hungarian Truth and Life Party (MIEP), regarded as a potential alliance partner for Fidesz, failed to surmount the 5 percent hurdle in the first round of voting.

The polls were preceded by an hysterical election campaign on the part of Orban, in which he referred to the socialists as lackeys of “big finance capital”, while taking every opportunity to warn against a relapse into communism. Orban swamped his political opponents in an unprecedented campaign of lies, thereby stirring up a wave of resentment. He railed against crime, claiming that a great number of jailed prisoners would vote for the socialists in hope of securing an amnesty, and demanded a significant tightening of national security in relation to drug dealers and foreigners. In his speeches he swore allegiance to the nation, the family and religious values.

In this demagogical campaign, Orban was supported by a host of politicians, including the former German chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU—Christian Democratic Party); the conservative candidate in upcoming German national elections, Edmund Stoiber (CSU—Christian Social Union); Italy’s Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi; and Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP—Austrian People’s Party), head of a governing coalition of the conservative People’s Party and

the neo-fascist Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria.

Former chancellor Kohl, who had previously campaigned for Berlusconi a number of times within the European Union (EU), emphasised during an election campaign meeting in Győr in western Hungary that it was extremely important for voters “to make the right decision at this historic moment” and to give their trust to men and women who loved their native land but had an open attitude to the world and neighbouring countries. “The people should make the right decision so that Victor Orban can continue as prime minister”, railed the former CDU chairman and chancellor. “That would be good for Hungary and for Europe.”

Such a reactionary and populist election campaign is in line with the politics of both Orban and his Fidesz Party.

At the end of the 1980s, Orban was among those well positioned, mainly young careerists who founded Fidesz. This party developed from an ultra-right youth organisation and was distinguished by a liberal economic programme, combined with hysterical anticommunism. Favouring the emergence of such a tendency was the fact that a settling of accounts with the fascism of the 1920s and 1930s had never occurred in Hungarian society, enabling elements of it to have a continuing influence on Hungarian politics.

The fascist regime of Micós Horthy, who assumed power by means of a bloody putsch in the 1920s, was later to become one of the Nazi dictatorship’s most loyal allies and an enthusiastic supporter of Jewish persecution. Thousands of resistance fighters, particularly from the labour movement, were deported or murdered under this regime in the 1930s.

Having escaped the Horthy regime by fleeing abroad, quite a few cadres of the Hungarian Communist Party later fell victim to the Stalinist purges, because post-war Hungary’s ubiquitous political police often consisted of survivors from the Horthy regime.

The collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy in eastern Europe led to a drastic rise in poverty and unemployment in Hungary as elsewhere, enabling the socialists to win the election in 1994. After 1994 the conservative camp was

almost completely routed and Orbán played a decisive role in reorganising and expanding Fidesz by transforming it over the next years into a new focal point for the most right-wing elements of the fractured conservatives. The subsequent extension of the party's name to include "Hungarian People's Party" harks back to this period.

Owing to their enormous social cutbacks, the governing coalition of socialists and liberals had once more completely discredited themselves by 1998, and Prime Minister Gyula Horn, a former central committee member of the Hungarian Communist Party, was forced to make way for the then 35-year-old Orbán after his unexpected election victory.

Initially Orbán tried to advocate a mishmash policy of turning towards the European Union and compliance with Brussels' demand for economic liberalisation on one hand, and nationalistic demagoguery on the other. However, confronted with mounting dissatisfaction from the population arising from increasingly stringent economic demands of the EU, Orbán placed the stress of his politics more and more on nationalism.

His nationalistic tone and speeches against the European Union became ever louder. He stressed that there was also "life outside the EU". Fidesz drew closer to the MIEP under the fascist István Csurka, a party quite openly articulating anti-Semitic and fascist perspectives. Last year this tendency also expressed itself in the election of László Kövér, a violent racist, to the post of deputy party leader.

Orbán infused his nationalism and scepticism about Europe with anti-capitalist rhetoric. Among other things, he promised to reclaim privatised companies as public property and grant subsidies to impoverished farmers, which eventually cost him the backing of Hungary's industrial and employers' associations. Fidesz's entire political programme is oriented towards a narrow social layer of small-scale business operators, the self-employed and middle class people—who fear for their survival in a globalised economy—and the impoverished, in part peasant, population in the rural districts. This is the reason why the socialists won so convincingly in all the major towns and cities in the last election.

Orbán's opponent and almost certainly Hungary's next head of government is the independent deputy, Peter Medgyessy. As the candidate most favoured by the socialists, he is a typical example of all those leading cadres of social democracy who turned into the most enthusiastic advocates of the market economy after the collapse of Stalinism in eastern Europe.

In the 1980s Medgyessy was finance minister and for a time deputy prime minister in the Stalinist government. After the right wing's election victory in 1990, he took up a position as a private banker. From 1996 to the electoral

demise of the Horn government in 1998, he was again finance minister. He became the successor of Lajos Bokros, who had been pressed by the Hungarian business community and the EU to launch a draconian redevelopment programme. Almost all of Hungary's social services and workers' protection rights fell victim to this programme and thousands lost their jobs as a result of the aggressively promoted privatisation of public companies. After massive protests, Bokros was forced to stand down.

Following his latest election defeat, Medgyessy once again returned to the world of business, where he soon found himself warding off charges of illegally cashing in on commissions from a real estate project.

Even running as an independent, Medgyessy was the preferred candidate for the socialists in the recent elections. He is regarded as a hard-line economist whose political decisions are strictly bound to economic and budgetary considerations. He is extremely well connected with Hungarian business circles, as well as with those in eastern and western Europe. In his first statement after the second round of voting, Medgyessy declared that entry into the European Union would have absolute priority for the government he would lead. He also announced his intention to quickly reduce taxation on capital gains.

In order to fulfil and maintain the entry requirements prescribed by the EU, the recently elected left-liberal government will have to push through further open market reforms which, in view of the developing economic crisis, are bound to be directed more forcefully than ever against the population.

By electing Medgyessy and the socialists, working people have jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. As a result of the clear electoral rejection of the right wing, the party whose drastic austerity measures first paved the way for nationalistic forces has taken power—the MSZP. It is precisely this same kind of political programme that the MSZP will continue to pursue in the coming years, thus boosting the most right-wing elements in society. Real opposition to such a development can only emerge from an independent movement of the working population that adopts an international, socialist perspective grounded in the analysis of its own history—particularly, the role of fascism and Stalinism in Hungary.



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