Interview with István Hegedüs: «I'm afraid we don't know yet what V.Orbán has in mind.»

Description

While the Hungarians will be called to cast their vote to re-elect their Parliament on April 8th 2018, everything suggests that Prime Minister's Fidesz Party is going to win the election. *Regard sur l'Est* has interviewed István Hegedüs, President of the NGO *The Hungarian Europe Society*.



Coming from a family of intellectuals which opposed the communist regime, István Hegedüs joined Fidesz in the early days of democratization, when it was a youth movement. He left it in 1994 and he now criticizes the choices of the Hungarian Prime Minister.

Please, present your career. Why did you leave Fidesz?

István Hegedüs: I became a member of the Fidesz's leadership council in the Fall of 1988 and participated in roundtable negotiations such as the opposition roundtable and the national roundtable in 1989 which led to the free elections in 1990. I was elected as a member of Parliament in 1990 at the first freely elected Parliament and, for three years, held the position of Vice-Chairman of the foreign affairs committee.
I left the Party in 1994, I have been practicing as an academic after obtaining a PhD in Sociology (2004). Actually, my dissertation was about the political shift of Fidesz in the 1990's. I am currently the chairman of a NGO "The Hungarian Europe Society" and live between Brussels and Budapest.
I joined Fidesz in certainly because it was a very fresh and rational political group of people who were very courageous young people of my generation, using a liberal language that I liked very much, not a fanatic language, but rational and moderate one. I came from a dissident tradition and joined with a lot of friends, participating in events such as the ones I have mentioned previously.
Problems started relatively early with internal fighting in the Party. During the early 1990's two groups emerged. I belonged to the minority group which opposed Viktor Orbán and his friends inside the Party who had a different political style, who were often more radical. In the early 1990's, they started to move from a liberal position which was the official declaration of our Party, towards a more right-wing position. They did it step by step, very carefully.There was also the problem that Orbán and his friends, in a way, centralized the Party. They considered us to be "traitors" to the Party and started a new fight against the liberal elite, the intellectuals and the media, with which we totally disagreed. So, when you look at what is happening nowadays in Hungary, a lot of things started twenty and some years ago when I was there, in the Party. As a former insider, I am much less surprised about what happened to Fidesz and where they are now, compared to so many people that do not understand what is going on or why it's happening.
Fidesz was very popular in the early 1990's. We led in the polls sometimes, but in the end we had only received 7% of the popular vote. My explanation was very different to that of Orbán's. An open fight then ensued because I blamed V. Orbán and his friends for the political life they had chosen to follow, including conspiracy theories they had already developed against the liberal elite, and even against the conservative government. Instead of fighting the government, they started to fight other opposition parties. V. Orbán and others blamed the liberal elites and the media and found external reasons for why we suffered a defeat at the elections.
The people who stayed in the Party continued moving to the right and they became the number 1 force of the political right by 1998. As expected, they won the elections by abandoning their liberal views. So that saw the completion of Fidesz's first shift. Instead of talking about individual rights, they started to talk about collective rights, family values,

Christianity and nationalism. Later, they moved even further to the right through populism, authoritarianism, and what we are seeing today.

How do you see the future of Hungary? Do you think demonstrations may have some impact on a possible evolution of the political forces in Hungary?

I will say I am more pessimistic. What I mean by this is that it is more likely that Orbán will win the election in April 2018. This is not because he is very popular but because the opposition is so fragmented, without a real leader or a group of leaders and it has no real agenda on how to change the general discourse.
Well, the biggest party is the Socialist party, in the opposition, which had been in power for many years but lost credibility in the eyes of many because of a lot of economic failures and other mistakes. There is also an internal rupture and there is another party which is smaller and more liberal, led by former socialist Prime Minister Gyurcsány. Altogether these two groups might have around 25% of the votes. In comparison, the government coalition (Fidesz-KDNP) has 45%. It is very hard for these two new socialist parties to increase their electorate because people don't believe they have changed. Although they have leaders as there is no any strategy on how to change that.
They are some smaller parties which were recently created, some of which are very new. Most are parties that sit at the center of the political spectrum, more liberal than the old left-wing parties. There is also a Green Party sitting already in Parliament with 5% which is not a big party. In 2014, almost all the opposition parties attempted to begin cooperating but things did not work out. People didn't vote enough for this alternative because they were not sure of their real desire for cooperation with each other and because V. Orbán had an overwhelming majority when he won in 2010. There also lacked a charismatic leader for this cooperation. Even though he lost a lot of seats in 2014, he was able to maintain his majority in Parliament. This process might continue but since the alternative is not strong enough, it is more similar to a process of losing votes for V. Orbán and not of gaining votes by the opposition.
There is also the extreme right wing party, Jobbik, which is moving towards the center, becoming more and more moderate. It is an open question whether this is a tactic or a real change. Just like in France with Marine Le Pen's strategy, it's a similar process. On the other hand, V. Orbán is becoming more extreme. So today, it's not evident which party is more radical: Jobbik or Fidesz. For example, on the issue of migration, V. Orbán has the same rhetoric as Jobbik. But Jobbik is certainly going to campaign alone and will get into Parliament because they already have around 20% of the votes. However, this is a system in which V. Orbán is positioned in the center and where the electoral regime supports the winner. It may even be the case that V. Orbán, with relatively few votes, wins the election, getting a 2/3 majority once again. Theoretically it might happen that anyone who wins the election might get a 2/3 majority. However, there is currently very little chance that Jobbik or the democratic left liberal opposition will win the elections.
We don't know yet because the political situation is changing. Regarding the demonstrations, they might have a psychological impact on the behavior of the people. All of the issues are coming together. It is quite clear that the demonstrations are against the regime. However, even those who protest (on grounds of academic freedom and the many other issues) might not be sure for whom to vote. So, even these people might stay at home, or their votes could be fragmented or lost. So, I am not sure whether this wave of demonstration might help the opposition parties. There is a gap between the two phenomena. That is why I am still pessimistic about the outcome of the elections in 2018.

Why does Orbán not want Hungary to leave the EU?

If V. Orbán wins, I'm afraid we don't know yet what he has in mind. But he always has something to do and he might introduce even stricter measures or steps to cement his power and this illiberal construction he started in 2010. This attack against academic freedom shows that there are many more issues which might come to surface when he continues to be the Prime Minister. Is Hungary going to stay or leave the EU? This is certainly one of the most important issues. If V. Orbán remains Prime Minister I think he would first opt to stay in the EU and try to be the new European strong figure. It would be a way to get the support of more populist parties and even extreme right-wing parties and to show the other heads of state and government that his policy was correct, especially regarding migration. But new heads are emerging (France, Luxemburg), and he might not have that many allies. Even the European parties close to his ideas (the centre-right political groups), criticize him and his new ideas (on the Central European University, on the so-called national consultations "stop Brussels", on the law that attacks NGO's and so on…). These three issues provoked a lot of

reactions from the European Commission and the European Parliament. But if everything remains the same and if nothing harder is decided against V. Orbán by European institutions, he might think that he is still strong enough to change official EU positions on these sensitive topics. On the contrary, if something is decided against him, he might decide to leave the European People's Party (EPP) before he is expelled. He probably would argue that this decision is the best way to restore national sovereignty which really means he would do what he wants. Maybe in a couple of years, he will argue to leave the European Union. Before doing so, he first will attempt to create a new group by joining the Polish PiS which is already out of the EPP and maybe create a stronger populist International Alliance to get together with Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen and others. EPP has some fears that they don't want to push V. Orbán towards Le Pen and Wilders to make that group too strong in Europe. His next step may lead him to think "enough is enough and let's allow Hungary to leave the European Union". Certainly he needs the money which comes from Brussels. After 2020, the money which comes from the European funds might be smaller and he might claim we should vote against the European Union otherwise there will be one million migrants coming in Hungary. I don't know what will be his rhetoric. Now it's very risky certainly because if Fidesz has a 2/3 majority in the Parliament, it could be deciding that Hungary leave the EU. What if V. Orbán calls for a referendum? He might not be successful which is very risky for him. If they are asked to decide whether they want to leave or remain in the EU, I think that the first reaction of the people (for 60 % of them) would be to remain.
If V. Orbán loses at the next election, or if something happens inside the Fidesz Party (a coup, or whatever the scenario is, and they are quite unlikely at the moment), then a new democratic government would have to face a lot of problems including their own fragmentation on different views and also that this regime was relatively well cemented based on the new constitution, new laws, a 2/3 majority. All this should be changed. We don't know how a new government would be able to get rid of the heritage of Orbán's regime. It's also another question on what would happen then.
This certainly means, at least for a while, that the old traditional western orientation of Hungary would be replaced, meaning this national sovereignty argument of V. Orbán, this freedom fight against Brussels that he has led until now.

Do you know if they are any links between V. Orbán and V. Putin?

I believe there is no special friendship between V. Putin and V. Orbán. For Putin, it is useful to have V. Orbán inside the EU as he says openly that he disagrees with the sanctions against Russia, never attacks Russia on human rights issues, never supports Ukraine in its freedom fight against Russia, never says that Crimea belongs to Ukraine, and so on. Therefore, it is important to count on such people inside Europe. Hungary never attempts to stop Russia's fake news *via Russia Today* or other media. Moreover, Hungarian right-wing media often quote this Russian fake news.
I do not think that V. Orbán wants to be a loyal supporter of Putin. He thinks that there is a relationship between Russia and Hungary, that he can use Russia to ask for cheap money, electricity and so on. The problem is that the money is not coming and the electricity is expensive. What he calls "Eastern Opening" does not really work for the moment, mainly because Hungary still belongs to the EU. His strategy is unsuccessful for the moment.
In his fight against Brussels, V. Orbán found in Russia a counter power that balances the power of Brussels and in his mind, he hopes that he can do whatever he wants in between. Personally, I think it is an alternative reality, but that might be his understanding of the situation.

Translation in French.

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