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The Post-Communist Extreme Right: The Jobbik Party in Hungary

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The Jobbik party: Short history, electoral results

Immediately after the fall of communism, far-right organizations and ideologies made an appearance in Hungary. In the initial stages these radical and overtly antisemitic groups appeared only on the margins of Hungarian political life. Most of them enjoyed foreign patronage, and became the local branches of Western fascist and neo-fascist organizations established by Hungarian fascists living abroad and Hungarian mutations of the skinhead movement. In mainstream politics, the first far-right party, the Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja, Party of Hungarian Justice and Life (MIÉP), was founded in 1993 by the writer István Csurka, who had previously served as deputy chairman of the governing centre-right party, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF). The standard discourse of the Hungarian far right had already taken its present form immediately after the expulsion of Csurka and his supporters from the governing party in 1993. Since then, the far-right ideologues have interpreted all conflicts and difficulties of the transition as a single process revolving around a struggle between a changing group of 'anti-Hungarians' who were governing the country before and after 1990 as well, and the 'national forces of resistance'. The tensions caused by economic and cultural globalization were portrayed as a conflict between cosmopolitan and national interests, joining international integration as a loss of national sovereignty, and the social consequences of the economic and political transition as the result of being at the mercy of colonial masters. The radical nationalist and antisemitic rhetoric of Csurka and his followers proved to be attractive to certain groups of the society: at the parliamentary election in 1994 the MIÉP got only 85,431 votes (1.58%); however, in 1998, MIÉP list got 248,901 votes (5.47%) which made it possible for the party to send 14 deputies to the Parliament. Although in 2002 MIÉP won nearly as many votes as four years earlier, due to the high turnout, its 245,326 votes (4.37%) were not enough to reach the 5 per cent threshold. This was the moment when Jobbik came on the scene.

Jobbik appeared in Hungarian political life as a generational organization. After MIÉP failed to reach the threshold needed to win seats in Parliament at the national elections in 2002, a group of radical right-wing students established an organization with the name Right-Wing Youth Association/Jobboldali Ifjúsági Közösség (JOBBIK). A year later, in October 2003, Jobbik was transformed into a political party and changed the meaning of its acronymic party name: from this moment on the official name of the party became Jobbik, The Movement for a Better Hungary.¹ In 2006, Jobbik entered an alliance with MIÉP. However, this coalition, called the MIÉP-Jobbik Third Way Alliance of Parties, won only 2.2 per cent (119,007 votes) of the popular vote and no seats. The alliance broke up shortly thereafter. Having successfully exploited the political and economic crisis after 2006, in 2009 the party received 427,773 votes (14.77%) and three seats in the European elections, and, finally, 855,436 votes (16.67%) and 17 seats (12.18%) in the 2010 parliamentary elections.

Structural causes of the rise of Jobbik

Research on elections and voter behaviour since 1990 has shown the inability of the Hungarian party system to integrate a substantial group of potential voters. Throughout the 20-year period after the collapse of communism, around one-third of voters have been characterized by uncertain party loyalties, weak political allegiances and significant voter volatility. This volatile group of voters, displaying strong anomic attitudes and a lack of any value priorities, has tended to migrate between the extremes on the political spectrum. Such attitudes and behaviour primarily characterized a section of society that was not the poorest but which contained many people who were the 'losers' in the transition, that is, people who lost out on chances of upward mobility and were threatened by losing their former status. Indicators suggest that for this shifting group, rejection and protest were the primary motives for voting. Moreover, the most important motive for choosing a party was its distance from the government in power (Kovács 2011: ch. 4).

The increasing distance between institutions and society and a steady decline in the authority of political institutions were the backdrop to this phenomenon. According to a 'confidence index' measuring the level of trust in ten different public institutions, Hungary achieved the third lowest score among 35 European countries, and these scores were extremely low in the case of the government, politicians and Parliament² (Tóth 2009: 19). Thus, over the last two decades, and especially during the recent economic crisis, a large amount of protest potential has accumulated in the country, creating a fertile ground for parties with an anti-establishment profile. Since, due to its reluctance to facing the communist past, the minuscule and hardly visible radical left wing was unable to exploit this potential, and a broad field opened up for the extreme right.

¹ The name Jobbik is actually a pun: the word 'jobb' means simultaneously 'better' and 'right(-wing)' in Hungarian.

² The index of confidence in institutions has been formed from the average confidence levels in political parties, Parliament, the government, the army, the police, public officials, trade unions, the press and television. The last four places are held by Parliament, the opposition, politicians and government.

The élitist attitude of the political class reinforced this alienation from the political institutions. Politicians of successive governments, in particular the leaders of the socialist-liberal coalition which governed the country between 2002 and 2010, made few efforts to convince citizens of the necessity of serious domestic reforms (requiring sacrifices from many), or of the long-term advantages of membership of such supranational organizations as the European Union (EU). Instead, when speaking about the necessary substantial and often painful changes, they used so-called reform-talk, a technocratic language that was incomprehensible to the majority but gradually became a marker of the political caste. At the same time, they tried to secure short-term political support by making promises concerning welfare and benefits, which they then failed to fulfil. Additionally, during these years, corruption became a systemic factor: owing to poor regulation of party financing, a large amount of 'black money' flowed to all mainstream parties (and sometimes to their politicians). Revelations of political corruption further eroded the authority of the political institutions and the political class.

The politicization of issues concerning the Roma population has doubtless been the most important factor in the rise of the extreme right. In Hungary, the various Roma groups make up between 5 and 8 per cent of the population. The majority of the Roma live in an 'underclass' status: they are unemployed, live in extreme poverty, are segregated from the majority, suffer from discrimination in everyday life and have few opportunities to change their situation (Szelényi & Ladányi 2006). Successive governments and the mainstream political élite have neglected the resulting economic and social tensions. Consequently, the 'Roma problem' has remained outside the political realm for two decades. The appearance of Jobbik has radically altered this state of affairs. Exploiting some local incidents and conflicts between Roma and non-Roma populations, Jobbik has succeeded in placing the issue at the heart of its political struggle, thereby establishing 'issue-ownership' and obtaining for the party a unique chance to appear as a substantial player in Hungarian political life (Karácsony & Róna 2010).

At the time of Jobbik's breakthrough in 2009, it became clear that both mainstream political actors – the socialist-liberal left and the national-conservative right – had followed a counterproductive strategy with regard to the extreme right: both of them had tried to exploit its appearance for their own political purposes. While the moderate right tended to neglect or downplay Jobbik's emergence and to split its constituency by appropriating certain parts of the party's agenda (radical anti-communism, support for Hungarian minorities abroad, etc.), the left – in an effort to keep its constituency mobilized and to discredit the 'collaborating' centre right – constantly employed an overexcited anti-fascist rhetoric, which enabled Jobbik to appear in the media as an agenda-setting political force.

The ideological and political framework of the extreme right

In the construction of the ideological and political profile of the party, the main purpose of Jobbik was to set clear and solid boundaries between the party and the political mainstream. While the parties of the left and centre right presented themselves as symbols and representatives of the new democratic order, Jobbik disputed the reality

of the transition and claimed that, despite superficial changes, there existed a hidden continuity between the pre-1990 old regime and the post-1990 system. Though the party has presented itself as a supporter of parliamentary democracy and political pluralism, its ideologues claim that the transition was fake and that the old regime continues to exist within the new institutions. This continuity, they argue, is manifest in the continuity of the economic and political élite, which is a feature of the mainstream left and right. Consequently, the party's main declared political aim is to complete the transition by breaking the power monopoly of the old élite and establishing a real and just democracy. As the party leader, Gabor Vona, wrote in a programme article in the party outlet:

Radicalism isn't an ideology, neither is it a conception, it's a perspective. If a person is struck by a car, and suffers serious injuries as a result, and two doctors arrive on the scene, one of whom slaps the injured fellow square in the face, while the other says, 'Here, have a paracetamol', the injured party would surely tell both of them to get lost. Hungary over the last decades hasn't merely been struck by a solitary automobile, it has been positively mown down by dozens of freight trains: and yet this is precisely what has been done. The Left just keeps slapping and kicking the patient regardless, while the Right just keeps stupefying them with all sorts of well-meaning sanctimony. Let's be straight about it for once: they have deliberately and completely destroyed the country. What we need here in the place of yet more slaps or painkillers is a radical – to continue the above analogy: a surgical – form of intervention. (Vona 2010, English translation of the original source)

By means of its argumentation, Jobbik has redefined traditional political cleavages. Instead of the traditional left-right divide, it set the new political frontline between the 'Old' and 'New', representing the 'Global' and the 'National'. With pseudo-revolutionary radicalism, Jobbik turned against the 'colonizing' global Other and its representatives, the old 'communist' and new 'post/neo-communist' élite. Jobbik's ideologues call for a new revolution in defence of the nation, whereby the party will form the young, new, revolutionary and national élite. As Krisztina Morvai, EP member of the party expressed in her introductory speech on the electoral programme of Jobbik:

. . . it is now also necessary to finally endeavour to apply those remedies, which politicians would like to have us believe simply do not exist, there being no alternative to the present system. This lie can now be maintained no longer. There is an alternative. . . . The moment has arrived when people yearning for both justice and self-determination no longer await the arrival of change from politics, but rather they themselves effect change! (Radical change 2010, English translation of the original source)

In confronting the global and the national, Jobbik's rhetoric has evoked the old antisemitic topos of a Jewish world conspiracy, with references – sometimes overt and sometimes coded – to the image of the cosmopolitan Jew who acts as the secret agent of globalization. A recurring formula in the present extremist discourse is the setting of 'our kind of people' (the in-group) against 'your kind' – outsiders that malign the country. It is because of these outsiders that ' . . . we cannot feel at home in our own country'. The

task is to reconquer Hungary from those who 'do not recognize common values and common principles' (Morvai 2008). This discourse, which is structurally very similar to Western anti-immigrant discourses, leaves little doubt about the identity of the 'Other', who is portrayed as a colonizing Israeli investor, as a media shark or as a former Jewish-communist functionary morphed into a Hungarian capitalist (see Kovács 2011: 200). However, so far, the anti-Semitism of the extreme right has not been transformed into a political ideology; it does not take the form of anti-Jewish political demands,³ as it does in the case of the Roma, where Jobbik demands cutting and restricting welfare services and the legalization of segregation in schools. 'The Jew' in this rhetoric has become a symbol for the threatening 'Other'. The antisemitic language currently serves primarily as a medium for establishing extreme right-wing identity, which can then be used to reveal 'our kind' and 'your kind'. The language creates a collectivity: those who speak it belong to 'Us', to 'real Hungarians', as opposed to those who represent the continuity of the former communist and the present 'colonialist' exploitation:

We Hungarians will not acknowledge without further ado that we have been sentenced to colonial status, and we shall not respond to the statement of your beloved boss, Shimon Peres, concerning the buying up of Hungary, by saying: Shalom, Shalom, just come and help yourself. Dear 'your kind', your impudence knows no bounds . . . If, after the fifty years of your communism, there had remained in us even a speck of the ancient Hungarian prowess, then after the so-called 'change of regime' your kind would not have unpacked your legendary suitcases, which were supposedly on standby. No. You would have left promptly with your suitcases! You would have voluntarily moved out of your stolen . . . villas, and . . . you would not have been able to put your grubby hands on the Hungarian people's property, our factories, our industrial plants, our hospitals . . . It would be nice if there were just a tiny little bit of truth to the supposed fear that the likes of you feel, owing to the alleged anti-Semitism and fascism etc. raging here . . . On the contrary, your kind visibly do not fear at all . . . We will not put up with this indefinitely. No and no! Because our kind have just this one home: Hungary. This is our country; we are at home here and it is here that we are at home. We shall take back our homeland from those who have taken it hostage! (Morvai 2008b)

In conjunction with a radically nationalistic and anti-globalist ideology, Jobbik's discourse strives to reposition the country in the East-West scheme. While the dominant discourse of the transition is organized around such subjects as 'returning to Europe' and 'becoming part of the West', Jobbik regularly uses radical anti-American, anti-Israel, pro-Russian, pro-Palestinian and pro-Iran rhetoric, such as Gabor Vona, the party leader:

If we . . . profess that we are the descendents of Atilla, we would suddenly find hundreds of millions ready to form a common basis for alliance . . . if we take a

³ "A first step into the direction of antisemitic political demands was the parliamentary question of a Jobbik MP on November 26, 2012, in which he demanded the listing of government members and MPs of Jewish origin 'representing security risk' for Hungary." See www.origo.hu/itthon/20121126-zsido-listat-keszitene-egy-jobbikos-kepviselo.html

look at the countries from Bulgaria to Turkey and all the way across to Eastern Asia, we realize that we, Hungarians, could have a lot of common political objectives with these countries. We come to realize that an alliance based and developed on the principles of Turanism instead of the Euro-Atlantic alliance would be more effective in serving the needs and interests of our nation . . . We can safely say that a true Muslim believer . . . is closer to God the Almighty, than the non-practising Christians inhabiting Europe today. If Hungary wants to regain its position as a strong player on the stage of international politics it should not head in the direction shown by Fidesz and MSZP . . . but instead membership in a Turanic alliance or, if needed, its leading role and initiative in forming such an alliance. (Vona, 2011; English translation of the original source)

Additionally, in order to show their distance from 'the West', some ideologues close to the party have made serious efforts to establish a 'sacral alternative' to the universalistic Judeo-Christian heritage. They strive to reconstruct a neo-pagan, pre-Christian national mythology, similar to the one that served in the pre-war period as the religious foundation of an exclusivist ethno-nationalism (Hubbes 2011, Szilágyi 2011).

Jobbik's constituency

Since the party received the votes of more than 10 per cent of the Hungarian adult population, it is obvious that it appeals not only to a social fringe but also to large groups. In the ongoing debate on the composition of the Jobbik electorate, three characteristic positions have appeared. The first one identifies the largest group of Jobbik voters as the 'losers' in the transition, those who lost their former economic and social status immediately after the collapse of the communist system and became supporters of the extremist parties after 1994, and as those who were hit by the consequences of the 2008–9 economic crisis (Grajczjár & Tóth 2011: 78–9). The second position contradicts the first; it stresses, based on certain poll results, that students and people of relatively high social status are overrepresented among Jobbik voters. On the basis of these data, the analysis characterizes Jobbik's core electorate as an ideologically motivated – extreme nationalist, xenophobic and antisemitic – group, which clearly does not belong to the 'losers' camp (Rudas 2010). Finally, the third position, while not denying the importance of the presence of the higher status group, states that the party's substantial voter group – mostly independent of their social background – consists of those who proved to be receptive to the focus on the Roma problem and consider Jobbik to be the only party to have successfully turned it into a political issue (Karácsony & Róna 2010).

After the 2010 elections we conducted an empirical analysis of a large sample of Jobbik's voters.⁴ The analysis provided a more refined picture of the constituency

⁴ I am indebted to Ipsos Zrt. and the Medián Opinion and Market Research Institute (both in Budapest), which gave me access to the aggregated party preference research files for the period 2007–10. The Ipsos file contained the data of 1,057 Jobbik voters, and the Median file the data of 2,235 voters. I am grateful to Ildikó Barna (ELTE University, Budapest, Social Science Faculty) for her assistance in data analysis.

of the party than previous surveys. As in the case of several extreme rightist parties elsewhere, men are significantly more likely than women to vote for Jobbik. As regards education level, high school and vocational school graduates make up the largest group among Jobbik voters, and the group with at least a high school diploma increased throughout the period; and so, by 2010, its share was greater than in the case of the two major parliamentary parties. Though people aged over 50 represented a substantial proportion of Jobbik voters (27%), people aged 18–29 represented the largest age group (29%). Compared to other parties' constituencies, this age group (and also first-time voters) was the largest among Jobbik voters. The salience of the younger generation is reflected by the age composition of the parliamentary faction of the party: while the average age of Hungarian MP's is 47 years, the average for the Jobbik faction is 38 years. The employment structure of the Jobbik electorate also differs significantly from those of the larger parties: the proportions of the economically active group, of students and of the unemployed, are higher, while that of pensioners is lower. These data seem to verify the hypothesis according to which the most characteristic groups of Jobbik supporters do not belong to the deprived group of 'losers' but are mostly ideologically motivated voters (Rudas 2010).

However, a closer analysis of the aggregated party preference files resulted in a more complex picture. If we examine the regional distribution of the Jobbik vote, it is striking that while in certain areas the party achieved much higher results than the average, in other regions its score was much lower than its national result. In the north-eastern region of the country, where the impact of the economic crisis has been the most devastating and there is a large Roma population, the party received 23–27 per cent of the votes and was the second strongest political party. In the western regions, however, less than 15 per cent of voters supported Jobbik, while in Budapest, with 11 per cent of the votes, Jobbik was the weakest party to reach the 5 per cent threshold. Our data indicate that the electorate of the party was significantly different in the different regions. According to the results of our analysis, the constituency of the party consists of three larger groups. The distribution of one important electoral group, that of the students, did not show significant differences across the regions. This young, active and educated group, which constitutes the most dynamic part of the party (and its activists), certainly does not belong to the 'losers'. Qualitative research on university students who support the party indicated (Iterson 2011), however, that the main motive of their party choice was not extreme nationalism and xenophobia, but first of all the rejection of the whole political establishment, that is, a profound dislike of the whole political élite of the transition. Their distance from the establishment has been expressed by taking a radical stance on issues (irredentism, anti-Roma, opposition to supranational integration, etc.) that seem to be 'owned' by Jobbik.

Though anti-establishment sentiment can also motivate other supporter groups of the party, the fact that the second and third substantial groups in Jobbik's constituency appear in different regions is also indicative of the presence of special electoral motives. The common characteristic of both electoral groups seems to be a completed vocational school, that is, in terms of level of education, they belong to the skilled worker stratum. There are, however, substantial differences between them. In

the economically more developed western regions of the country, where the Roma percentage of the population is low, unemployed people and low income groups tend to support Jobbik, whereas in the underdeveloped regions with a high Roma population percentage this is true of economically active, employed and better-off people. While the first group can be termed 'losers', the second group obviously does not belong to those most seriously affected by the transition and the crisis. The main motive for their party choice is probably status anxiety: they have experienced, in their region, a permanent deterioration in the economic situation. Consequently, their attained statuses are increasingly threatened. It is more and more difficult for them to find jobs corresponding to their educational level, to run businesses in a shrinking market, to face losses in the value of their property, to experience the declining quality of the local infrastructure (education, public health, transport, etc.) and to realize that they cannot expect effective support from the state. For this group – also identified in their research by Karácsony and Róna – the visible presence of a large Roma population serves as an explanation for the above problems and for the prejudiced rationalization of status anxiety. They perceive the Roma population as a competitor for scarce resources; the daily confrontations and conflicts that stem from the presence of this marginalized and deprived group in their towns and villages validate their conviction that only a 'solution to the Gypsy question' could fend off the perceived threats. However, in view of the paralysis of the state organs, they look for such a 'solution' outside the existing institutional system. Their specific problems lead them to take a strong anti-establishment stance. Therefore, they support the political programme of Jobbik, with its demands for drastic cuts in the welfare services for Roma, for the legalization of segregation in schools and in housing and for the organization of paramilitary units for 'self-defence'.

Thus, the results of the analysis indicate that the Jobbik constituency contains several electoral subgroups. A young and mainly student-dominated group is overrepresented among Jobbik voters in almost every region of the country. The group of 'losers' is significantly present in the Jobbik constituency in the economically prosperous regions. However, in poorer areas with large Roma populations, a relatively well-educated, economically active and better-off group constitutes the core electorate. Thus, on the 'demand side' the common denominator of the different electoral groups seems to be neither 'loser' status nor a purely ideologically motivated choice (extreme nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, etc). Though all these elements are widespread among Jobbik voters, the binding element between the different groups of the constituency seems to be a strong anti-establishment attitude.⁵ Consequently, a key factor to the party's success has necessarily been an ability to successfully unite these electoral groups with different motivations and expectations.

⁵ On the impact and function of anti-establishment attitudes on the extreme right, see Bustikova 2009. In their study, Karácsony and Róna also identified the anti-establishment attitude as one of the most characteristic traits of the far-right constituency in Hungary (Karácsony & Róna 2010). Other research on the rise of the 'social demand' for right-wing extremism in Hungary showed that the proportion of those who do not have trust in the existing institutional system grew drastically between 2002 (12%) and 2009 (46%) (Krekó et al. 2011).

As the electoral successes of Jobbik indicate, these characteristics on the 'demand side' were correctly identified by the 'supply side': the party organized its programme declarations and campaigns around subjects that place Jobbik on one side of the political arena and all the other mainstream parties on the other. Demanding revision of the post-First World War Trianon Treaty, the exclusion of Roma, withdrawal from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) membership and the use of barely concealed antisemitic language for identity construction served this function. The 'ownership' of these subjects has positioned the party unambiguously in opposition to the 'establishment' parties – which, regardless of whether they are on the left or right, in government or in opposition, all accept the present European order and values (see Beichelt & Minkenberg 2001: 12, Karácsony & Róna 2010). The ideology of radical extreme ethnic nationalism proved to be an effective functioning frame for the expression of the anti-establishment attitudes stemming from different sources. The unification of the different anti-establishment groups into one constituency has been the achievement of a new political generation in the political sphere: people whose political socialization took place after the collapse of the old system. While the 'old' radical right – the Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja (MIÉP) – was strongly traditionalist, anti-modern and supported by an ageing electorate, the core of Jobbik voters comprises younger age groups that are receptive to new methods of political marketing, skilled in the use of new social media and able to create their own political language and thus use new tools of outreach and mobilization.

The new extreme right: A post-communist phenomenon?

The post-communist extreme right in Hungary and in other countries in the region doubtless displays very similar features to the extreme right in the Western European countries, for example, by using anti-establishment, anti-élitist and xenophobic rhetoric. However, its appearance is not simply a consequence of the 'Europeanization' of the former communist countries, a sign of the formation of a Western-type party system. Most experts on the Eastern European extreme right agree that the emergence and character of these radical parties are *sui generis* consequences of the transition and, directly or indirectly, of the history of the countries in which they have emerged (Beichelt & Minkenberg 2001, Bustikova & Kitschelt 2009). There is an interesting and ongoing debate on the weight of the individual determinants in the emergence of the radical right, but according to a dominant consensus, a combination of pre- and post-Second World War legacies (especially the nature of the communist system) and the conflicts and cleavages of the transition period (especially the economic and social costs of the transition) determine the nature and strength of the radical right in individual post-communist countries. However, the forecasts made on the basis of these considerations in recent years appear to have been incorrect: particularly in Hungary the support for the radical right has been much stronger than expected (Beichelt & Minkenberg 2001: 16). Though much more research is needed to explain the latest developments, it seems that one factor explaining this failure is a tendency to 'depoliticize' the post-communist extreme right phenomenon by using mostly

socio-psychological and/or historical-structural theories to explain the radical right party choice. The presence of large groups with authoritarian and social dominance-oriented attitudes as well as the existence of ethnocentric and nationalist legacies and socio-economic tensions have served as important preconditions for mobilizing the radical electorate, but the radical right's electoral success has ultimately depended on its ability to turn elements of people's 'life-world' that were not formerly part of the 'political' into political issues. In Hungary, an example of such an element has been the growing anti-establishment attitude. The extreme right is a political phenomenon per se, and the specificities of its Eastern European variants can be understood only by grasping the specificities of the political sphere in every singular post-communist country.

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