From Periphery to the Center: Can Jobbik Woo the Hungarian Youth?

A year has gone by since the parliamentary elections in Hungary took place in April 2014. Since then, the Hungarian ruling party Fidesz has experienced significant decline in popularity. Although it still tops the political rankings, the latest poll suggests that the far right Jobbik is at the heels of Fidesz just 3% of preferential votes from catching up with the ruling party. Fidesz received a 21% share of preferential votes, Jobbik 18% and the opposition party, MSZP, 12% (Ipsos 2015). Although a different poll shows Jobbik at 15% and Fidesz at 24% (Euronews 2015), it does not challenge the fact that the numbers for the ruling Fidesz have hit a new low. The reasons behind this changing trend may be numerous, however, this paper underscores that the weak opposition on the left side of the spectrum in Hungary along with the (increasingly) unpopular government policies largely contribute to the fact that Fidesz is losing support and Jobbik is becoming a serious political contender. This proves to be true especially among young Hungarians aged 18 to 33 among whom, as the poll suggests, a fifth would vote for the far right Jobbik (Ipsos 2015). This paper argues that the growing popularity of Jobbik, among youth in particular, does not necessarily mean that young people have become less liberal and prone to prejudice. It is rather due to economic and social uncertainty, which is making them more vulnerable to populist rhetoric of the far right. This is strengthened further by the efforts of Jobbik to create a “youth subculture” which seeks to reach out to young people far beyond politics and as it appears, it does work.

Electoral Breakthrough of Jobbik

The right-wing political party Jobbik, also known as the Movement for a Better Hungary, was founded in October, 2003, promoting a nationalist, radical anti-Roma, anti-Semitic, anti-establishment narrative. In 2007 Jobbik established a paramilitary organization called the Hungarian Guard with several thousand members. Its co-founder, Gabor Vona, pledged that the goal of the Guard is to “carry out the real change (from communism) and to rescue Hungarians” (Spiegel Online International 2007). The Guard
organized marches in towns and villages with a considerable concentration of the Roma population, inciting racial intolerance and violence (ERRC 2012). The Hungarian Guard was dissolved by court order in 2009 as it was found guilty of violating the law and threatening minorities. Although the incidents connected to the Hungarian Guard were highly controversial and tarnished Jobbik’s reputation, surprisingly, the party’s popularity gradually started to grow and in the elections to the European Parliament of 2009, Jobbik received 14.77% of the popular vote. The general election of 2010 marked an electoral breakthrough for Jobbik as it won 47 seats in the Hungarian parliament with 16.7% of the vote and became the third largest parliamentary party. Following the 2014 election, Jobbik has confirmed its position with 20.2% of the vote and is currently one of the strongest radical movements in the European Union. One of the reasons behind its electoral success is the absence of a strong opposition party that would provide a viable alternative to the governing Fidesz which has experienced a number of political earthquakes during its administration, including mass demonstrations and protests. In addition, the political environment in Hungary is characterized by a significantly fragmented and discredited left-wing opposition. As the recent poll results from March 2015 highlight, the most baffling is the fact that Jobbik has become increasingly popular among young people, especially first-time voters. Among those under 30, the party support for Jobbik has already outrun the ruling Fidesz (Ipsos 2015).

Creating a “Jobbik Subculture”

Jobbik’s rising support can be attributed to its intensive efforts to woo the Hungarian youth. On the outside, the party has undergone a critical change of image, softening its rhetoric and approach towards its potential young voters. The party declares it was formed by “primarily conservative university students and there are still many young among its supporters [sic]” (Jobbik - Movement for a Better Hungary 2013). However, these statements are not mere catchphrases. As the situation in Hungary demonstrates, it is also the extensive involvement of Jobbik with youth that nourishes the political radicalization of this vulnerable social group. What’s more, in its campaign Jobbik managed to extend political participation and activism towards creating a youth subculture with a community identity which is constantly attracting more supporters. The young men and women featured on

1. Due to a reduced number of seats in the Parliament from 386 to 199, the valid votes accounted for 23 Jobbik MPs.
2. Since 2006, the socialist MSZP has not been able to recover from a colossal political scandal that triggered a wave of resentment towards the Hungarian left whose credibility and public support rapidly declined. The impotent leftist opposition further discredited itself in a number of ill-mannered attempts to vilify the ruling Fidesz (Politics.hu 2015a).
Jobbik campaign ads are not just a corny marketing trick – they are in fact real, flesh-and-blood representatives of the radical movement. Jobbik is currently running a Youth Platform that claims to be “Hungary’s most dynamically developing youth organisation.” The youth offshoot of Jobbik seeks to “awaken our [Hungarian] youth and encourage them to lead a valuable and sensible life centered around an active and joyful yet goal-oriented community... We want a Hungary where it is good to be young and to plan your future.” The youth platform by design seems to present itself as a moderate movement with the goal of engaging young people who want to be involved not only politically, but who want to become a part of a meaningful community that is based on the national and Christian values that have been “destroyed by corrupt and unscrupulous politicians in the past decades.” For many, this profile can be attractive as it provides an important social element that is often either overlooked or unsuccessfully addressed by the mainstream politicians. Nevertheless, Jobbik’s youth program is not restricted to political participation as it also offers a wide range of other opportunities for involvement all of which accompany the party ideology. The elements of the new Jobbik subculture include various sports activities, fashion brands or music festivals. As an example, the “national rock” music bands such as Kárpáti and Hungarica gained notable commercial success. Additionally, summer camps organized by Jobbik with the “morale boost” of the party leader Gabor Vona are another convenient platform for active youth engagement (Reuters 2012).

Nowadays, the internet and social media provide unprecedented political channels to address young people in particular, and Jobbik has shown it knows how to make the best of this phenomena. Much of its mobilizing activities take place online, including far right web news portals such as kuruc.info and party Facebook pages. While the governing Fidesz has 185,714 likes on Facebook, Jobbik has over a hundred thousand more fans with 286,147 likes on its official page. Moreover, the youth organization of Jobbik (Jobbik Ifjúsági Tagozat) has 59,466 likes since it joined Facebook in 2010, while the youth branch of Fidesz Fidelitas, established in 1996, has only 6,004 likes. Even though these figures provide just a brief illustration and represent a small segment of popular support, the example of social media activity indicates considerable popularity of Jobbik. Considering the demonstrable potency of social media and the scope to which it can reach out to the internet users and in this case, voters, the headstart of Jobbik in relation to young people is evident. The case of a youth leader of Fidesz caught...
by the police in February with 30,000 in forged euro notes (Politics.hu 2015b) is just another example of how the ruling party’s image gets smeared and how similar incidents may further favour Jobbik and its zealous youth agenda.

The Tricky Issue of Youth Unemployment

Except from Jobbik, there are radical right wing parties such as the Golden Dawn in Greece or the National Front in France that do remarkably well among young voters (The Economist 2015). Is really the younger generation becoming less liberal and prone to prejudice and group enmity? Or is it rather that the radical parties have found a niche in the sphere of youth politics? Seemingly, the anti-establishment rhetoric and demand for a return to “true values” of society, building on a generational clash between the old, corrupt and incompetent politicians and the young, driven and capable leaders appeal to young voters with little or no political preferences. The radical parties, as challengers of the established system, successfully use different tools to mobilize these youngster and win considerable share of votes.

In the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008, young people have been severely hit by economic stagnation and unemployment\(^4\). While the politicians in power proclaim their support for economic growth and the creation of job opportunities, there are masses of young people with no or little job experience that find it incredibly hard to compete on the job market. Growing concerns about economic standing and quality of life can be an impetus for young people to support politicians and parties that offer often unrealistic, yet appealing solutions. In its political manifesto, Jobbik devotes a whole section to “Youth programme” where based on examples from different EU countries such as Austria, Slovenia, Portugal, Sweden or the Netherlands, the party wants to “help students learn about career options and make a more informed decision, ” “support youth to be employed in shortage occupations as well as in sectors where skill shortage is predicted for the near future” or “promote internship projects for school graduates, we will facilitate cooperation between the largest private business companies and regional Employment Centres,...” (Jobbik - Movement for a Better Hungary 2015). This is certainly something that speaks to the young, jobless graduates who often seek to go

\(^4\) As of November, 2014, the unemployment rate of young people in the EU was 21.9%.
abroad to find a better paying job. According to a report published by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, the number of Hungarians who emigrate from the country for a longer period increased by 46% between 2013 and 2014. In addition, majority of the Hungarians who decide to leave the country are under 30. Expectations are that this exodus will not slow down, as the people are “driven to leave the country by [sic] the unsatisfactory state of the economy, the social system and public atmosphere, which is aggravated by educational policies” (Hungary Today 2015a). In a new home rental scheme introduced in early 2015, Jobbik proposed affordable rental homes for young families to “reduce emigration and boost childbirth” (Hungary Today 2015b). As a bonus, this scheme would benefit only Hungarian construction companies and rely on Hungarian suppliers, sidetracking any foreign involvement that would take away the Hungarian taxpayers’ money.

**When the Sun Goes Down**

Economic stagnation that followed the world financial crisis, prevailing scepticism towards traditional politicians and ineffective solutions to the high youth unemployment sustain the frustration of young people not only in Hungary, but across a number of European states. In this context, political parties that promise swift, radical and easy solutions gain significant popularity and provide an option for the disillusioned voter to cast a protest vote. Jobbik is a startling example of how a radical right wing movement with a history of a nationalist, anti-Semitic and racist narrative can capitalize on the increasing dissatisfaction with the mainstream politics and establish itself as a relevant political force. The use of web channels and online social platforms also provides this party with a unique communication space to disseminate its messages. In addition, through the creation of a distinct subculture, Jobbik has managed to create a more personal bond with the young electorate.

The solution to tackling the problem of rising support for extremism and radicalization of youth politics is not straightforward and needs willingness and engagement of a wide spectrum of actors. This can be done through systemic work with young people who feel abandoned by the state and find themselves struggling with no prospects of fundamental structural reforms in their favor, which of course, requires recognition and political will. It seems that at least for now, many of the burning issues concerning
youth are being downplayed, which, in turn, further upsets the young electorate. The biggest problem is that although many of the young supporters of Jobbik may not even sympathize with the radical party ideology (and Jobbik has been working hard to improve its image), this support is a source of significant political leverage. Most importantly, it allows Jobbik to make inroads deeper into the mainstream politics while skillfully concealing its extremist tendencies. Jobbik will most probably try to retain its most radical supporters and its core voter base. What’s more, when thinking about the current status of Jobbik, we need to realize that it is still a “work in progress” as the ultimate goal of the party is to be in the position to form a government. The change in the electoral law in 2011 caused that the majoritarian effect of the electoral system is stronger and significantly favors big parties. This means that with a score of around 30-40% of the popular vote, a single party can win an absolute or even constitutional majority in the parliament. This may represent a new challenge for Jobbik to undertake in the years to come.

On the other hand, Orban and the ruling Fidesz have been gradually drifting towards right-wing extremist positions. As a response to the growing popularity of Jobbik, the governing party has even adopted a number of policies that are very much in line with Jobbik’s programme. By adopting Jobbik’s rhetoric, a radical narrative is becoming part of the political mainstream which may have critical consequences. Until the left wing opposition makes a quick recovery and picks up its pieces to become a relevant political challenger, and unless the majority of Hungarian electorate takes a critical look at its representatives, the future of democracy in the country could be at risk.

Supported by a grant from the Foundation Open Society Institute in cooperation with the Think Tank Fund of the Open Society Foundations.

5 Most recently, Fidesz is demonizing immigrants from non-EU countries, taking advantage of the rising anti-immigration sentiments in Hungary.
References:


