The Hungarian Far right and Europe

The Hungarian political scene has witnessed a rapid rise in popularity, since 2006, of far right movements and rhetoric. The most prominent representative of this political current is The Movement for a Better Hungary, or JOBBIK, as it is known indigenously. The growth of far right political formations in Hungary happened both in the context of an overall increase of support for right-wing parties in the country, and secondly, acted as a contributing agent to this development. One of the main elements of far right rhetoric in Hungary today is a tough stance taken against the idea of Europe. This idea is so popular at present, that it has permeated into the political discourse of the conservative, mainstream right, and has become an important talking point of right-wing politics. This paper aims to narrate and analyze the manner in which the concept of Europe entered contemporary far right discourses in Hungary, how it was interpreted and utilized for political gain, and lastly, how it has affected mainstream politics.

Theory and methodology

For the purposes of this paper, the most important concept is that of the far right. Therefore, the object of study has to be accurately delimited and circumscribed. I shall make use of Cas Mudde’s definition of the far right, provided in his 2000 book, *The ideology of the extreme right* (Mudde 2000). Mudde describes the ideal-type of an European far right party as being part of a “party family”. This “family” of extremist political movements and formations shares a number of ideological traits, but of course, also exhibits numerous ideological and discursive variations. Membership in this group is determined, according to Mudde, by five important ideological elements: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and the strong state. This definition shall be used for heuristic purposes; as we shall see, a number of other elements, such as a certain populist style, are also particular to far right political parties.

As stated above, the object of this paper is to analyze the manner in which the Hungarian far right envisions and constructs Europe, and reveal its inner logic, in order to obtain a better understanding of far right ideology and its popularity. In this sense, the concept of Europe shall be described from the far right perspective, and therefore does not elicit theoretical circumscriptions.
The sources utilized by this paper shall come from a variety of fields: print and online media, but also audio-visual sources and the official publications of the party itself. I shall attempt to isolate and analyze discursive elements pertaining to the idea of Europe and its avatars in the declarations of party officials and media outlets officially associated with Jobbik. The timeframe of these sources shall be started at 2007, the time of the first coherent party program, and stretch up to the present. A content analysis of these discourses shall reveal their functioning mechanisms and provide a theoretical blueprint of the interpretation of the European idea by the Hungarian far right. In this sense, I analyze political ideology in a conceptual manner, according to the scheme of British political scientist, Michael Freeden. In his 1998 work, Ideologies and Political Theory (Freeden 1998), he put forward the hypothesis according to which the political sphere is formed out of a number of basic political concepts, shared and understood as being important by a respective society. Such concepts may include the nation, the state, freedom, and so forth. I theorize that at present, Europe constitutes such a concept. Freeden contends that these concepts and their definitions are constantly disputed by political ideologies, which construct their own ideological entity out of the particular definitions they give to such concepts. The goal of a political formation, defined by ideology (Mudde), is to ensure domination of its own brand of concepts over society. This is the mechanism according to which political discourses and debates function and determine the political life of a certain country or even, supra-national entity.

The last method that shall be utilized in this essay is the comparative, or historical method. I hypothesize that, in order to better understand the present form of the political debate on the right concerning Europe, one has to look at its roots and its evolution over time. This facilitates a dissection of basic motives, and an isolation of the most important ones. The diachronic approach shall better account for the context in which certain discursive elements gained notoriety. I shall also make a brief asymmetric- synchronic comparison between the interpretation of Europe of the mainstream, and that of the radical right, in order to highlight the differences and similarities, and account for the growing popularity of the theme in right-wing circles.

The question of Europe on the right

The idea of Europe has evolved quite a lot within Hungarian right-wing ideology over the last decade. Hungarian political formations, both right and left-wing, had traditionally exhibited a pro-European or neutral tone, as can be seen in the campaigns surrounding the
country’s accession into the European Union, and continued in subsequent years. Both the governing center-right FIDESZ party, and the left-wing opposition supported EU membership (Batory 2008). Euro-skepticism did not affect large sections of the population up to 2008-9. According to the Eurobarometer data concerning attitudes toward EU membership, in autumn 2003, 56% of the interviewed sample believed it was a good thing, versus 10% negative opinions, and 24% undecided (EU 2007). In 2007, this had still not changed significantly, even though the country found itself in a deep crisis of political trust and a strong recession. In spring 2007, the number of those in favor of EU membership was still at 43%, facing an increased opposition of 17%, and 37% neutral opinions (EU 2007). However, within five years, by spring 2012, Hungary had become one of the top three most-Eurosceptic states in the EU, alongside Latvia and the United Kingdom (Eu 2012), with 33% positive responses to 28% negative. This development is the result of a number of factors, pertaining to economics and the worldwide financial crisis, but as I am to show below, is also due to opportunistic internal politicking.

In 2007, Jobbik published its first serious national political program, named after prince Gábor Bethlen. The choice of name was meant to inspire personal charisma and national genius, as the medieval ruler was known for preserving an independent Hungarian political entity after the country’s disastrous defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the preamble of the program contains the first hints of the orientation of the party’s foreign policy. It details the country’s situation as being caught in a “bloody international situation” and in spite of it being torn in three, “with his example, and a strong political strategy and will, all difficulties can be overcome (Jobbik 2007)”.

The program in all is very brief, only giving brief and incipient glimpses on party ideology at this time. The international stance follows this suit, very little being said in detail on the subject of the country’s Europeanism, or membership in the EU, following the party’s lack of activity in and around the time of accession in 2004. However, the program contains all the seeds for the later Jobbik discourse on Europe. It denounces the EU as an organization currently on the wrong track both culturally and politically. The Union, the Bethlen-program says, “denies its Christian roots”, “favors the interests of the strong against those of the weak”, and “serves as a tool for globalization” (Jobbik 2007). It is interesting that at this time, neither the declarations of the party’s leaders, neither its 2007 program officially demanded any radical stance against the EU. Rather, it demanded firstly a greater public participation (with the use

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3 however, it must be noted that the party was formed officially only a year before, in 2003
of plebiscites, to which subject I shall return) in the debate surrounding the then-upcoming EU constitution. Secondly, and surprisingly, it called for stronger involvement of the Hungary on the EU forums, and increased regional cooperation with its neighboring states, in order to safeguard its national interests (Jobbik 2007).

The expansion of the party in the period between 2007 and 2009 meant an important influx of party cadres and activists with higher training. The increased media attention also necessitated a more coherent and detailed expression of the party’s ideology. Shortly after the notable success of Jobbik in the June 7 2009 European Parliament elections (where the party secured 15% of the vote, only 2.6% less than the ruling socialist party at the time), Jobbik announced its new party program (June 14 2009). The program, which served as the main element of the party’s electoral platform in the upcoming elections of 2010, exhibits a much more detailed and theorized, on the other hand, radical approach to the European issue.

The European issue, from 2009 onwards, is a part of the larger foreign policy agenda of Jobbik, which is governed by a number of prerequisites, understood as being pivotal to national interest. The first of these is related to nationalism and the national idea: the issue of the Hungarian minorities abroad. This is a pivotal issue in post-1989 Hungarian political life, the treatment of which no party can eschew, and seminal in the discourse about the nation itself. Jobbik understands Hungary’s European status as a vehicle for the improvement of the conditions of the Hungarian minorities in the neighboring states. This is partly the result of the party’s own ideological makeup, and faulty political communication at the time of the accession drive in 2004. Governing center-right party FIDESZ interpreted EU membership as a solution for the minority issue: the drop in border restrictions, and improvement in minority policies would defuse the issue once all neighboring states secured membership (Batory 2008). This idea, however, gave cause to the 2009 Jobbik program to denounce the inefficiency of the Union in improving the actual situation of the minorities. The program is constructed on a simple binomial of past mistakes, and the promised “better future”, a group of strategies that would bring solutions, should Jobbik secure the necessary amount of votes. Jobbik proposed the usage of Hungary’s status as EU member to obtain administrative and political autonomy and self-determination for the Hungarian population of would-be EU candidate states Serbia and Ukraine.

The second characteristic of the Hungary-Europe relationship is its political-economic nature. Already hinted at in the brief sentences of the 2007 program (“the strong” versus “the
weak”), this theory is fully fleshed out two years later. Firstly, the politics of the last two decades is globally declared to be a failure. According to the Radical Change Program, the blame lies with the political class, who have set up a situation in which foreign political and economic interest dominate, and Hungary finds itself in a one-sided relationship with the West. Here, an important theory was seeded: the colony-metropolis metaphor. The EU is described as serving only foreign interests, of multi-national, western companies, which stifle domestic business, initiatives and interests (Jobbik 2009). The biased relationship is also blamed for the high rate of emigration of qualified youths from Hungary, toward richer member states. The EU reduces the “mobility” and “room for maneuver” of its small member states foreign policies’, internally. Externally, it is “an extension of the foreign policy of the USA, via its servile pro-American stance”.

In the 2009 program, Jobbik also laid out the bases for what it believed to be seminal for Europeanism and defined Europe in its own terms. The three basic elements are: greek political thought, Roman law and Christian morality (Jobbik 2009). The EU is understood as an attempt to establish an European super-state on the American model, the Lisbon Treaty being a proof and tool of this demarche. Jobbik declared itself squarely opposed to any such attempts, and significantly affirmed that it is prepared to come into direct conflict with “Brussels”, if needed.

As can be seen from the brief overview above, the basic tenets of Jobbik’s attitude toward the EU and Europe in general were laid down in 2009. At this time, they were just one among many other elements in the program, as can be seen from the room allotted to it: 5 pages out of 88. Other issues, such as order, and the rule of law, by comparison, occupy 10 pages. After the 2010 parliamentary elections, Jobbik became the second-largest opposition force in the legislative chamber, the elections being carried by a large margin by center-right FIDESZ. The ruling party did not exhibit any clear criticism toward the EU at the time. However, as time progressed, it came into conflict with Brussels on a number of issues. Due to this, an internal context in which open criticism of the EU became acceptable, was set up. The set of criticisms laid out by Jobbik in 2009 became a reference point for mainstream politics.

The conflict between FIDESZ and certain European political actors began shortly after the assumption of power in Hungary by the aforementioned party. The subjects of the conflict were manifold, but three can be clearly isolated. The first was Hungary’s maverick and
controversial new economic and financial policy; a combination between populist actions and measures meant to stimulate the growth of small and medium-sized businesses, its details are unimportant, but it is essential to state that they were and are somewhat incongruous with EU policies. The second was Hungary’s new constitution, meant to replace the revised version of Hungary’s basic law, which was a hangover of the previous communist regime. Finally, Hungary’s new media law came under fire in certain EU forums. The latter two were accused of ensuring an undue domination of the ruling party over Hungarian politics and media. The reaction of FIDESZ to criticism coming from the west was to enter into open conflict, on the level of declarations, with the critics, and defend their legislative projects and state policies. Unfortunately, much of the discursive toolkit and content was borrowed from Jobbik. On a speech in March 15th 2011, prime minister Orbán Viktor likened the EU with the Austrian colonizers of the 19th century, and projected his party’s efforts as a freedom fight for national empowerment. The center-periphery and metropolis-colony elements were clearly borrowed from Jobbik, as they were inconspicuously absent from the discourse of the party before 2010.

The conflict did not die down, and came to a head with the temporary freeze of cohesionary funds of Hungary in early 2012. In reaction, Jobbik organized a full-fledged anti-EU protest in Budapest, with thousands in attendance, on January the 14th. Party MP Novák Előd publicly burned the flag of the Union at this gathering, following up his earlier demonstration in Hungarian parliament, when he brought placards likening the EU to totalitarian dictatorships into the legislative chamber. The idea of a plebiscite to decide on future EU membership was put forward by the speakers. This continued the long line of such populist suggestions, as was the case in 2009 with the Lisbon Treaty, and demonstrates one of the characteristics attributed to the EU by the Hungarian far right: that is in essence, an illegitimate organization. Its lack of “real democracy” was attacked in the 2007 and 2009 programs, and in numerous speeches at and since the 2012 demonstration. Its lack of legitimacy and popular support would be proven, Jobbik argues, by subjecting it to a popular vote. The refusal of this only demonstrates the truth of the accusation, according to the Hungarian right wingers(“Jobbik Demonstration Footage” 2012; Jobbik 2007, 2009).

The Jobbik demonstration was followed only a week later by a similar demonstration organized by civic circles close to the right wing of Fidesz, entitled the Peace March. It was declared to be a cross-party demonstration against the violation of Hungarian sovereignty and in support of the Hungarian government. It was attended by an estimate of 100 thousand people, and was headed by a banner saying: “We will not be a colony”.

Alternatives to Europe: opening towards the East

The idea of an alternative to the Western and European orientation of Hungary first appeared on the pages of the 2009 program of Jobbik and grew in proportion since. The idea is based in one of the motives of ultranationalist historiography, namely on the idea of the Eastern ethnic origin and essence of the Hungarian nation. This genealogy of the Hungarians, loosely based on circumstantial evidence, states that Hungarian ethnicity is Eastern, and Turkic, rather than Finno-Ugric. The obvious conclusion would be, as stated in the Radical Change Program, to “come into closer relation with the peoples of Inner Asia, which to this day look upon us as kindred nations…so that Hungary may function as a lynchpin between the Far East and Europe” (Jobbik 2009).

The Eastern premise was also utilized by Jobbik to develop a foreign policy which would downgrade the supposed “domination of Hungary’s overt euro-atlantic and…Zionist orientation”, in the favor of building a new system of international partnerships. The first goal of these would be the resumption of a leading role in the Balkans, which is seen as “a historic legacy”. Hungary may also build on its Turkic kinship, and build up important commercial and political relations with Turkey, which is seen as an alternative partner outside the European Union. Turkey was named by party member Volner János as a viable alternative, alongside China and Russia in a 2012 press statement (“Interview with Volner Janos” 2012). The program also declared the new international context “multipolar”, and seeks to reaffirm Hungarian sovereignty via a system of extra-European partnerships. The most important element in this construction is a pro-Russian foreign policy. The 2009 program decries the loss of Russian markets, which was a “blow for the Hungarian agriculture and small industry”, and seeks to reopen commercial relationships with the Russian Federation. Due to “historic conflicts”, Hungary relinquished her opportunity to build diplomatic relationships with Russia. This is seen by Jobbik as an alternative that would give maneuvering room for the country, and give it the possibility of constructing its own foreign policies.

The “Eastern option” has also made it into the mainstream of political life in Hungary, due to its partial adoption by the ruling party. FIDESZ has espoused the idea on a number of occasions, even going so far as sending a delegation to Azerbaijan, at the initiative of minister of the economy, Matolesy György, who declared that Hungary “can target new markets with exports aimed at Eastern markets…in order to ensure the balance of economic relations in the eastern and western side of the EU” (Barikad.hu 2013).
The “Europe of Nations”

One of the main characteristics of Hungarian far right ideology, as expressed by Jobbik, concerning the European issue is a lack of logic and consistency. As we have already seen above, they often seek to exploit EU membership in order to obtain rights for Hungarians abroad, while at the same time arguing for political and economic detachment from Europe.

The concept of the “Europe of Nations” is consistent with this approach. While searching for allies outside of the EU, Jobbik was also at the spearhead of forging alliances within it. The vehicle for this was the notion of a “Europe of Nations”. First mentioned in the 2007 Bethlen program, its name was probably inspired by the historical events of the 1848 national revolutions. It is loosely defined in the 2009 program and by subsequent declarations of party leaders as a loose association of European states, based on mutual respect for national sovereignty and Christian-Western moral standards. Europe is defined as a community based on “diversity of nations, equality amongst them and a commonality of interests” (Jobbik 2009). This rather hazy definition was further refined on the 24th of October 2009, when, at the initiative of Jobbik, the Alliance of European National Movements was formed in Budapest. The members of the Alliance are far right and nationalist movements from all over Europe: Jobbik, Fiamma Tricolore (Italy), National Democratic Party (Bulgaria), the British National Party (UK), and the Republican Social Movement (Spain). The Alliance has a number of important luminaries of the European far right as associates: Bruno Gollnisch and Jean Marie Le Pen of France’s Front National, Christian Verougstraete of Belgium’s Vlaams Party and Bartosz Jozef Kownacki of the Polish Law and Justice Party.

The Alliance set out nine demands at its inaugural meeting:

I The creation of a Europe of free, independent and equal nations in the framework of a confederation of sovereign nation states, refraining from taking decisions on matters properly taken by states themselves.

II The rejection of any attempt to create a centralist European Super State.

III The promotion of the freedom, dignity and equal rights of every citizen, and opposition to all forms of totalitarianism.

IV The primacy of direct votes by the people or their elected representatives over any administrative or bureaucratic body.
V The effective protection of Europe against new threats, such as terrorism and religious, political, economic, or financial imperialism.

VI A peaceful and humane settlement of immigration problems through, among other measures, international cooperation aiming at development and self sufficiency of third world countries.

VII Strong policies in favour of families aiming at solving the demographic deficit in Europe and promoting traditional values throughout society.

VIII The preservation of the diversity of Europe that results from the variety of our identities, traditions, languages and indigenous cultures.

IX A common fight of the European peoples against social dumping and the destructive effects of globalisation. (AEMN 2012)

The demands are all consistent with Jobbik’s vision of Europe and the EU at present, and construct a vision of the future based on a reaffirmation of nationalism, and promoting conservative social values. The organizations list as its goals the development of a network of cooperation between European nationalist movements, whether within or outside the EU, and to work out common objectives and approaches for those parties that are represented in EU institutions. The Alliance functions at present as a loose association, with few common activities and statements, but it can be seen as a platform for future cooperation of far right forces in Europe.

Conclusions

The idea of the place of Hungary within Europe has known a significant transformation in the last few years. This is mainly due to the rapid rise of popularity of the far right interpretation of this concept, and its crossing-over into mainstream politics. This was is due to the specific internal political climate of Hungary, in which political opportunism on the part of the center-right party has resulted in a radicalization of its political ideology. This is turn, has caused the far right to take a tougher stance on a number of issues, including the European question. On the other hand, the detail and varied demarches with which the Hungarian far right seeks to combat the EU or provide alternatives to it, demonstrates only the pervasiveness and importance of the concept of Europe for Hungarian political ideology today. Hungary is understood in conjunction with some sort of European identity and
existence, prompting the far right to tackle this issue as well, albeit with its own brand of solutions. The existence and increased popularity of such alternative constructions of Europe demonstrates the importance of the issue today at the national level, but also sends warning signals toward the European political actors that the established version of the European identity may be under threat.

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Bibliography:


