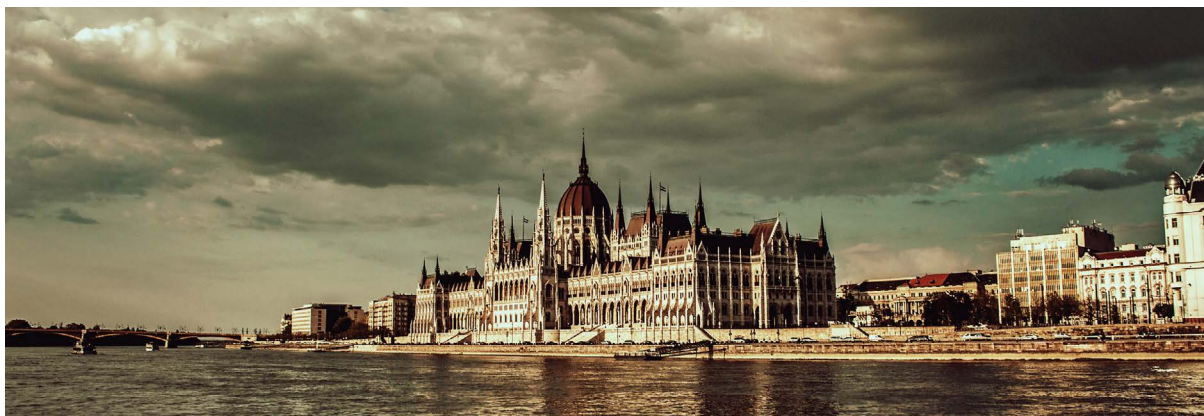


BLOG POST

HISTORY OF A BREAKDOWN: FIDESZ'S DEPARTURE FROM THE EPP GROUP AT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

06/05/2021 | LUKÁŠ MACEK |

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The departure of the Hungarian Fidesz¹ party from the European People's Party (EPP) has been discussed for at least a decade. As soon as Viktor Orbán came back into office in 2010, some of his government's decisions started to cause tensions with the rest of the European Union, including within the EPP and its group in the European Parliament. Admittedly, in July 2013, MEPs of the EPP still broadly supported Viktor Orbán during the vote of the [Tavares report](#), written by Portuguese MEP Rui Tavares (Greens/EFA), highly critical of the Hungarian government. While in May 2015, the "Hello, Dictator!" by which Jean-Claude Juncker, then President of the European Commission, greeted Viktor Orbán passed as a joke, relations between Fidesz and its European partners soon deteriorated significantly thereafter. On Hungary's side, let us remember the political exploitation of the migration crisis, with in particular the [national "Stop Brussels" consultation](#) in April 2017, the conflict with the Central European University and the fight against the "Soros empire" or the "Soros plan", to quote the usual terms of the Hungarian prime minister². In view of these developments, the [Sargentini report](#), named after Dutch MEP Judith Sargentini (Greens/EFA), was

1. The Alliance of Young Democrats (in Hungarian: Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége) was founded on 30 March 1988 to offset the influence of the Hungarian Young Communist League (KISZ), particularly in universities. Fidesz became a political party in the early 1990s. In 1993, the upper age limit of 35 years was abolished and Fidesz became a conventional political party under the official name "Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Party (1995-2003), then "Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance" (since 2003).

2. Viktor Orbán accuses George Soros of intentionally striving to subvert European identity and civilisation, particularly by orchestrating massive immigration from outside Europe, through the funding of a network of NGOs, international organisations, media outlets and left-wing parties. For a recent example of this anti-Soros rhetoric: <https://parizs.mfa.gov.hu/fra/news/reponse-de-viktor-orban-a-la-nouvelle-intervention-de-george-soros>. (in French). For an analysis of the use of "anti-Soros" themes by Fidesz: Krekó, Péter; Enyedi, Zsolt (2018): "Orbán's Laboratory of illiberalism" in *Journal of Democracy*, July 2018, Vol. 29, N° 3, especially pages 45-48.

adopted in September 2018 with a sizeable number of EPP votes, and two months later at the EPP congress in Helsinki, Donald Tusk, in his role as President of the EPP, delivered a [genuine indictment against Viktor Orbán](#), without actually naming him. The provocation that was the final straw was the [Hungarian government's campaign openly attacking Jean-Claude Juncker](#) in February 2019. As thirteen members of the EPP (out of a total of 83) demanded Fidesz's direct exclusion, the party's leadership proposed a compromise in March 2019. With 190 votes against 3, [Fidesz was "suspended"](#): it was deprived of voting rights, could not attend party meetings and could not propose candidates for party leadership positions. This suspension - which did not however affect the EPP group in the European Parliament - was renewed in February 2020.

A break from Fidesz's specific European strategy

This worsening of relations between the EPP and its Hungarian member reflects a break in Viktor Orbán's European strategy, following the migration crisis. Up to then, Fidesz's controversial domestic agenda could be tolerated due to its accommodating and even constructive attitude on the European scene. It stood apart from some of the other parties of the Central-European conservative right, in particular the Polish Law and Justice party (PiS) and the Czech Civic Democratic Party (ODS). The latter has never been a member of the EPP. Its MEPs, after having seats in the "European Democrats" (ED) of the EPP-ED group in the European Parliament from 2004 to 2009, broke away, with British conservatives, to create the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. As regards PiS, it firstly sat in the Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) group, before joining ECR.

Fidesz's European strategy has been very different: after being a member of Liberal International in the 1990s, Fidesz became a loyal and active member of the EPP from 2000. Viktor Orbán was one of the EPP's vice-presidents from 2002 to 2012. He has always stressed this Christian-democrat attachment and continues to claim – even today – a [kinship with Helmut Kohl](#). The passage on Fidesz and Viktor Orbán in the memoirs of Wilfried Martens³ speaks volumes: just as Fidesz was returning to power in Hungary, there was no indication of how acrimonious relations between this party and the EPP were to become.

Fidesz and the EPP: from concessions to impairment

Over the years, a compromise was reached between Fidesz and the rest of the EPP: behaviour loyal to the Christian-democrat family in Brussels in exchange for a certain indulgence from European institutions in view of the increasingly controversial actions in domestic politics. Yet, Viktor Orbán himself began to torpedo this compromise, increasingly taking swipes at the European Union and presenting himself as the vessel for a vision of Europe that is a far cry from the EPP's traditional fundamental principles. The emergence of a powerful ally on the European stage with the PiS' return to power in Poland in 2015 likely had something to do with this radicalisation, with Viktor Orbán openly making himself the figurehead of a

3. Martens, Wilfried (2008): *Europe: I Struggle, I Overcome*, Springer, 2008

“cultural counter-revolution”⁴, an attitude that is virtually incompatible with the EPP’s line. The aforementioned speech given by Donald Tusk could not have been clearer on this issue: “If you are against the rule of law and independent judiciary (...), if you don’t like the free press and NGOs, if you tolerate xenophobia, nationalism and anti-Semitism (...), if you place the state and the nation against, or above, the freedom and dignity of the individual (...), if you want to replace the Western model of liberal democracy with an Eastern model of “authoritarian democracy”, you are not a Christian Democrat”.

Yet, despite the mounting level of feeling of part of the EPP that the aforementioned concessions were increasingly becoming an impairment, the status quo was maintained. For Fidesz, the EPP’s security remained attractive despite everything and to keep it, the party constantly attempted to convince the rest of the EPP that it was a victim of malicious propaganda from the left and would not stray further from the EPP’s fundamental principles than the CSU, the ÖVP or Forza Italia. In this way, following Fidesz’s victory in the Hungarian parliamentary elections in April 2018, József Szájer, the key figure in Fidesz’s European policy, sent [a letter to his MEP colleagues in the EPP group](#) in which he exposed at length these assertions, starting by thanking the group Chairman, Manfred Weber (CSU), for having come to Budapest during the campaign to support Fidesz.

There were several reasons for the EPP to turn a blind eye. Firstly, parliamentary arithmetic, with the Fidesz MEPs at stake, eleven from 2014 to 2018, and twelve since 2019⁵. Secondly, the desire to avoid internal tensions, the different attitudes towards Fidesz within the EPP and even within national parties, as demonstrated by the [votes of French "The Republicans" MEPs on the Sargentini report](#). These internal divisions were highlighted by the work of the “three wise men” (Herman Van Rompuy, Wolfgang Schlüssel, Hans-Gert Pöttering), appointed in March 2019 to clarify the action to be taken on Fidesz’s suspension. Yet, [they were unable to propose a clear way forward](#), the former Austrian Chancellor recommending indulgence, the former Belgian President of the European Council representing the hard line and the former German President of the European Parliament playing the mediator. Lastly, some members of the EPP remained attentive to the argument of the moderating effect of keeping Fidesz within the Christian-democrat family.

2017 – 2020: a gradual alienation without a clear break

The argument of a moderating effect became increasingly less convincing in view of Viktor Orbán’s lack of inclination for conciliation. The [affair of the Central European University](#) played a significant role, from 2017-18. While the Hungarian government’s attitude to immigration and various societal issues did find a form of more or less open sympathy within the EPP and triggered a defensive reflex against the left, this was not the case for the breaches of academic freedom and anti-Soros conspiracy theories. This was compounded by [Viktor Orbán’s openly pro-Russian position](#)⁶ and the growing concerns for freedom of press in Hungary⁶.

4. Cf. Krekó, and Enyedi, *op. cit.*

5. Hungarian MEPs accounted for the 7th national delegation of the EPP group in 2014, and the 4th in 2019.

6. According to the [ranking by Reporters without Borders](#), Hungary fell from 56th position in 2013 to 89th in 2020. The [2020 report of the Centre for media pluralism and media freedom of the European University Institute](#) corroborates this, stating that “Risks to media pluralism in Hungary are still considerably high and increasing in comparison with the previous editions of the MPM”.

However, it is the attacks against its own political family that delivered the fatal blow to the argument of the EPP's moderating influence on its Hungarian member: the aforementioned poster campaign targeting Jean-Claude Juncker and the good relations between Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini and Heinz-Christian Strache ahead of the 2019 European elections. The break appeared to be final when Manfred Weber – though from the CSU, reputedly having an understanding attitude towards Viktor Orbán – claimed that he would rather lose the European Commission presidency than win it by Fidesz votes, with Viktor Orbán replying that [he would no longer support the EPP's Spitzenkandidat](#).

And yet, following the European elections in May 2019, Fidesz MEPs once again preferred to take seats within the EPP group, which welcomed them despite the party's suspension in force since March 2019. However, just less than two years later, the break was also enacted at the European Parliament. Beyond the situation of the COVID-19 crisis which further heightened pre-existing tensions⁷, several factors explain this outcome.

2020 – 2021: severed ties

After being “dropped” by a majority of the EPP during the vote on the Sargentini report, Viktor Orbán was further isolated during the adoption, in January 2020, of the resolution which noted the deterioration of the rule of law in Hungary and Poland⁸. Membership of the EPP was of no help either in the fight against conditioning aid under the recovery plan to compliance with the rule of law. In response, Hungarian and Polish vetoes in this case further heightened the feeling within the EPP that Hungary was taking a course that was incompatible with its values and political priorities.

It is against this backdrop that an open conflict erupted in December 2020 within the EPP group, following comments by Hungarian MEP Tamás Deutsch that compared the arguments of Manfred Weber, chair of the EPP group, calling upon Hungary to accept the conditionality in question, to those of the Gestapo and the secret police in communist Hungary. As for the anti-Juncker posters, it is an attack on one of its own that stepped up the sequence of events. Admittedly, the EPP group still tried to navigate the issue, by avoiding Tamás Deutsch's exclusion. He was only deprived of the right to express himself on behalf of the group. Yet it did adopt a [text which severely criticised Fidesz](#), left the question of its future exclusion open and called on “all Fidesz MEPs to reflect on whether their fundamental political convictions still are compatible with the values and core content of the EPP Group”. This decision was adopted by an overwhelming majority: 133 votes in favour, 6 against, 3 abstentions. The health crisis is a convenient excuse for this prevarication, as the group called “on the EPP party to take a final decision on the membership of Fidesz immediately when health conditions allow this to happen”.

⁷. With the controversies surrounding the Hungarian version of the state of health emergency and Budapest's vaccine policy.

⁸. Out of the EPP MEPs present, 28% voted against the [Sargentini report](#) in 2018, 23% against the [resolution of 16 January 2020](#) which “notes with concern that the reports and statements by the Commission and international bodies (...) indicate that the situation in both Poland and Hungary has deteriorated since the triggering of Article 7(1) of the TEU”. Yet, little more than a year before the Sargentini report, 86% of EPP MEPs voted against another [resolution critical of the situation in Hungary](#) which, as a result, was only adopted with a slim majority (source: votewatch.eu).

Less than three months later, in early March 2021, the break was complete: following the Deutsch episode, the EPP group decided to amend its internal rules. The draft [new rules of procedure](#) state the definition of its values, including a direct reference to article 2 of the Treaty of the EU and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. They also set out the procedure to exclude a member of the group and above all they establish a new intermediary option: the suspension of rights of one or more members of the group. This amendment paves the way for a new solution equivalent to what the EPP party had implemented from March 2019: between doing nothing and opting for permanent exclusion, suspending the rights of a member of the group, as was already done on a group level for Tamás Deutsch, on an ad hoc basis.

Viktor Orbán attempted to prevent this text from being adopted. On 28 February 2021, he wrote [a letter to Manfred Weber](#). He also explicitly threatened that Fidesz MEPs would withdraw from the group, if the new rules were adopted. This was not enough: [148 group members approved the revised rules of procedure](#), knowing full well what this vote would mean for Fidesz – i.e. 79% of the group (Fidesz MEPs included) and 82% of votes, well above the required two thirds. On the same day, Viktor Orbán informed Manfred Weber [that Fidesz MEPs would leave the EPP group](#)⁹.

An unexpected incident further compounded these factors with long-standing roots, contributing to the negative dynamic in relations between Fidesz and the rest of the EPP group: the political downfall of József Szájer at the end of November 2020, after he was [arrested by Belgian police at an orgy](#) in Brussels during the lockdown. Beyond the harm this did to the credibility of Fidesz's conservative rhetoric, this scandal meant that Viktor Orbán had lost his key ally in Brussels. MEP since 2004, József Szájer was an influential member of the EPP group. [Respected within the group](#), he was the acceptable face of "orbánism", particularly [compatible with the EPP](#) as he tended to illustrate the other side of Fidesz's "traditional" conservatism, while being able to strike compromises within the EPP group, rather than Viktor Orbán's "illiberal", authoritarian and conflictual course of action, even though he worked hard to defend it. It is legitimate to wonder if the Deutsch affair would have gone the same way if József Szájer had been able to play the mediator once again.

The EPP group did not therefore exclude or lose Fidesz MEPs despite itself. It pushed them towards the exit. A method without panache, but which was most probably the most appropriate to maintain unity within the group. The EPP therefore gave itself a narrative that leaves less room for Fidesz's victim rhetoric: the latter was not excluded, it preferred to leave rather than abiding by the rules adopted by a very strong majority.

⁹. The EPP did not lose all of its Hungarian members, however, as out of the 13 Hungarian MEPs elected on the Fidesz list in 2019, one belonged to the small KDNP party (Christian Democratic People's Party).

Medium- and long-term effects

The EPP group is making a lacklustre effort to reinforce its cohesion and clarify its political line, legibility and ideological integrity. However, we should remember that while the Fidesz/EPP case has been the most blatant, other groups are facing the trend of “troublesome members”: the group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) with Robert Fico’s SMER party in Slovakia and the Renew Europe group with Andrej Babiš’ ANO party in the Czech Republic, to name but two.

The question remains regarding [the future of Fidesz MEPs](#). Splendid isolation among the non-attached? The downfall in terms of influence would be brutal. Membership of the ECR group? This solution seems to be the simplest and in line with the excellent relations between Fidesz and the PiS. Yet ECR remains a relatively weak group, even though the arrival of Fidesz would enable it to overtake the Greens/EFA by one seat. Incidentally, this would further distance this group –already dominated by the PiS and Fratelli d’Italia– from what it used to be, with the British conservative party before the Johnson era. This could prompt some of the other current members to leave.

Or a broad “anti-immigration” group could be created, merging the bulk of the troops from the ECR and ID groups, in the hope of winning second place behind the EPP from the S&D group, with Viktor Orbán as the great unifier of hard-right and far-right politicians, on the basis of a sovereignist and anti-immigration programme? This is undoubtedly his plan, set out already during the 2019 European election campaign. “I am convinced that Europe needs an alliance of anti-immigration parties”, he declared on 2 May 2019 in Budapest, upon [welcoming Matteo Salvini for talks](#). However, for now, the project is facing a number of divergent positions and political interests. Salvini’s Lega supports the pro-European coalition currently in power in Italy and has not completely ruled out joining the EPP.

As regards Hungarian politics, while the short-term effects of the break with the EPP may appear marginal, it may well weaken Fidesz in the long term. The race could potentially be close for the 2022 parliamentary election. Alone in Hungary against an opposition which seems more able to unite, isolated and at odds with its traditional political family on the European stage, will Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz pay dearly for this loss of guarantee provided by the EPP, in a country in which public opinion remains largely in favour of the European Union¹⁰? ■

10. By means of example: according to the Special Eurobarometer 500 (October-November 2020), 69% of Hungarians believe that belonging to the EU is a “good thing”, against only 6% who claim the opposite (the EU average being 66% and 10% respectively).

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