

Back to the Future? Revolution of the Right in Hungary

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WORKING PAPER

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There has been a lot of heated rhetoric in the Western press about the political changes that have been taking place in Hungary since 2010, when the conservative Fidesz government took office after a landslide victory over its opponents in the national parliamentary elections. Fidesz's victory was so total that it controls more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament. Such a commanding majority gives Fidesz the power to formulate policy without regard for opposition views. It has used this power with vigor, effecting what some scholars have called a "constitutional revolution" from above. For the first time in roughly seven decades the Right is firmly and totally in control, able to rule without consulting the opposition. Some see Hungary veering into outright dictatorship, or at best into an illiberal hybrid regime akin to that which ruled in the interwar period. This paper examines the claim that anything like old interwar cleavages are resurfacing. It argues that although aspects of current politics resemble the "Christian-national" course pursued in the years before the Second World War, the social bases of contemporary rightist dominance differ dramatically.

Continuities with the Past

Observers of Hungary since the 2010 election can be forgiven for drawing historical parallels, for on the surface there are some striking similarities between the current situation and that of the interwar Horthy regime. First and foremost is the dominance of the Right, with an opposition that remains critical of government but has been given no real say over policy. Although it is not often appreciated, interwar Hungary did have a multiparty system with a real opposition, a functioning parliament with actual governing power, and a lively press. Of course Fidesz enjoys more democratic legitimacy than the government party in Horthy's Hungary, which did not come to power in free and fair elections. But Fidesz's grip on parliament also, arguably, gives it an even freer hand to remake politics than the interwar government party had.

Second, Fidesz's political principles are at odds with many of the liberal norms championed by the European Union, and redolent of an older style, pre-communist conservative politics. Consider the new Fidesz-inspired Fundamental Law, which took effect on January 1, 2012. The preamble begins with "God bless the Hungarians", unusual enough in mostly secular Europe, and goes on to recognize the role of Christianity in preserving statehood. It affirms that "the family and the nation constitute the principal framework" of the nation's existence. It invalidates the communist constitution of 1949, and declares an "abiding need for spiritual and intellectual renewal" after decades of moral decay in the twentieth century. It affirms the existence of one Hungarian nation "that belongs together", and pledges

Hungarian state support for efforts to preserve the identity of Hungarians living outside of Hungary. It pledges the state to protect “the institution of marriage as the union between a man and a woman”, “the family as the basis of the nation’s survival,” and life “from the moment of conception.” In contrast with the 1989 constitution, which the Fundamental Law is intended to replace, there is no explicit recognition of Hungary’s borders with its neighbors.¹ This omission is not explicitly revanchist, but neither is it a blueprint for future peaceful relations in Hungary’s neighborhood. Hungary did not have a formal written constitution during the interwar period, but most of the aforementioned passages from the current constitution would, I think, be uncontroversial to rightist politicians from that period. The leaders of Hungary’s main Churches have not voiced any major objections.

Third, in the substance of some of Fidesz’s policies one can see efforts to repeal some of the changes that have occurred since the communists took power in the late 1940’s. As noted above, the Fundamental Law invalidates the 1949 constitution, which was introduced by the communists but which, in heavily amended form, continued as the law of the land even after the fall of communism. But Fidesz has gone much further. It is instituting a radical lustration in which the influence of socialists and their sympathizers is removed from public life, permanently if possible. For example, it has reorganized public administration, and its appointees now have positions of authority in most public institutions, including those responsible for the media, budgetary affairs, and, most importantly, the judiciary. As noted by many, the rules by which this reorganization has been effected ensure that the changes endure even if Fidesz loses the next national parliamentary election.

Moreover, at the end of 2011 parliament passed the Act on Transitional Provisions of the Fundamental Law. The main purpose of the law is to ensure a smooth transition from the old constitutional order to the new one, but the law’s preamble is devoted to listing the offenses of the communist dictatorship and affirming the continuing culpability of the old ruling party’s leadership. In an accusation of stunning audacity, it all but openly declares the Hungarian Socialist Party--- Fidesz’s main political rival and a party that has led three governments since 1990--- as a criminal organization for being the successor to the old ruling party and “inheritor of the illegally amassed wealth and as the benefiter of the illegitimate advantages acquired during the transition.”² The law calls for the creation of a National Memorial Commission to investigate communist crimes and warns that

¹ See Gábor Halmai, “Towards an illiberal democracy: Hungary’s new constitution,” *Eurozine*, p. 8.

² See “The Act on the Transitional Provisions of the Fundamental Law,” translated by Miklós Bánkuti, Kim Lane Scheppele, and Gábor Halmai.

personal information on perpetrators may be revealed to the public. It is unlikely that this legislation will lead to the Socialist Party being disbanded, but that matters less than the law's shrill language and sinister intent, which is reminiscent of the latter part of interwar period, when the radical right was on the rise and the ruling party sought to ensure its continuing dominance through harassment of opposition leaders and manifold restrictions on opposition activity.

Fidesz's policies on relations between church and state revert from the generally liberal statutes that have held sway since the fall of communism, in which the state did not attempt to adjudicate what and was not a religion, to the more traditional practice of the state recognizing the importance of some denominations over others. Fidesz's views on the importance of Christianity to the continuity of the Hungarian nation are clear in the Fundamental Law, but as a matter of state recognition the relevant cleavage is not that between Christianity and other religions, but between religious denominations that have historical traditions and social support and other religious groups without such roots in society. The Fundamental Law affirms the right of every Hungarian to freely choose his or her religion, whatever it may be, but only officially recognized religious groups may receive financial benefits from the state. For Fidesz these more restrictive provisions are justified as a means of ensuring that only "significant" religious groups can make claims on state resources. The Law affirms the separation of church and state, but also recognizes the importance of church-state cooperation for community goals.

Fourth, like Horthy's ruling conservatives in the 1930's, Fidesz faces opposition not just from the left, which disagrees in principle, but from the radical right, which thinks Fidesz's reassertion of traditional values does not go nearly far enough. The Jobbik party garnered roughly 17 percent of the popular vote in the 2010 elections. It has been termed neo-fascist by some, but in style and partially even in substance appears to have more in common with old-style 1930's fascists than with its contemporary radical right brethren in other European countries. For example, in its anti-Jewish rhetoric it has no rival among European parliamentary parties. Its depictions of Jews could have appeared in *Der Stürmer*. In an effort to incite anti-Semitism one of its parliamentarians recently brought up a blood libel from the 1880's on the floor of parliament. The act was broadly condemned by other parties and the leaders of the major churches.³ Though Jobbik stops short of calling for the revision of borders (at least in its program), it is unambiguously sympathetic to revanchist

³ See, for example, the article in Népszabadság Online, „Egyházi vezetők szólaltak fel a gyűlöletkeltés ellen,” April 25, 2012, [http://nol.hu/belfold/egyhazi-vezetok_fel_kell_szolalni_a_gyuloletkeltes_ellen](http://nol.hu/belfold/egyhazi-vezetok-fel-kell-szolalni-a-gyuloletkeltes-ellen). Accessed May 13, 2012.

claims and makes liberal use of the iconography of Greater Hungary. It openly declares that its political horizons are limited not just to the country of Hungary, but to the *nation's* borders, which of course extend into neighboring countries. (“A Jobbik politikai horizontját nem az ország, hanem a nemzet határai szabják meg.”) Like its 1930's fascist forebears Jobbik came with a paramilitary arm, the Magyar Gárda, which the state eventually dissolved.

Reasons for Fidesz's Triumph

Moral regeneration, the centrality of the family, national unity in the face of domestic and foreign threats, *sotto voce* revanchism, the criminality of the left--- as matters of parliamentary debate and government policy these all have the whiff of the 1930's. Two questions immediately pose themselves. First, how did this situation come about? Second, does it constitute something like the return to interwar politics? A detailed discussion of the evolution of Fidesz from its liberal beginnings to its illiberal present is beyond the scope of this essay. However, we can outline the reasons Fidesz achieved such a dominant position, a quite anomalous outcome given Hungary's multiparty parliamentary system.

First there is the incompetence of other right-wing parties. A right-wing coalition of three parties governed during the first democratic cycle in 1990-1994: the MDF, FKgP, KDNP. But they all proved themselves incapable of effective governance. Part of this had to do with the difficulty of the tasks. It was during this period that democracy was being consolidated, and that economic reform and its attendant social dislocations were being legislated. But arguably more had to do with their incompetence. They had little governing experience, and made a lot of mistakes which the public punished them for. When these parties collapsed Fidesz moved in to fill the space, and became something like a catch-all party for conservative voters.

Second there is the arrogance of the Socialists. The principal beneficiary of the collapse of the failure of the 1990-1994 rightist coalition was the Hungarian Socialist Party, the main heir to the old communist party. The party had shed its dictatorial past, and campaigned in 1994 on its competence to navigate the shoals of economic and political reform. It won in a landslide, and despite perceived corruption and recurring scandals won again in 2002 and 2006. But the arrogance of the party leadership, and in particular of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, finally caused grave damage. In a now famous speech that was supposed to be confidential but in fact was taped and made public, Gyurcsány admitted that the party had lied through its teeth to win re-election, and that in fact it had accomplished little in its previous four years of governing. The public reaction to this was nothing short of an earthquake, with Fidesz and other parties organizing massive protests and calls for his resignation. The

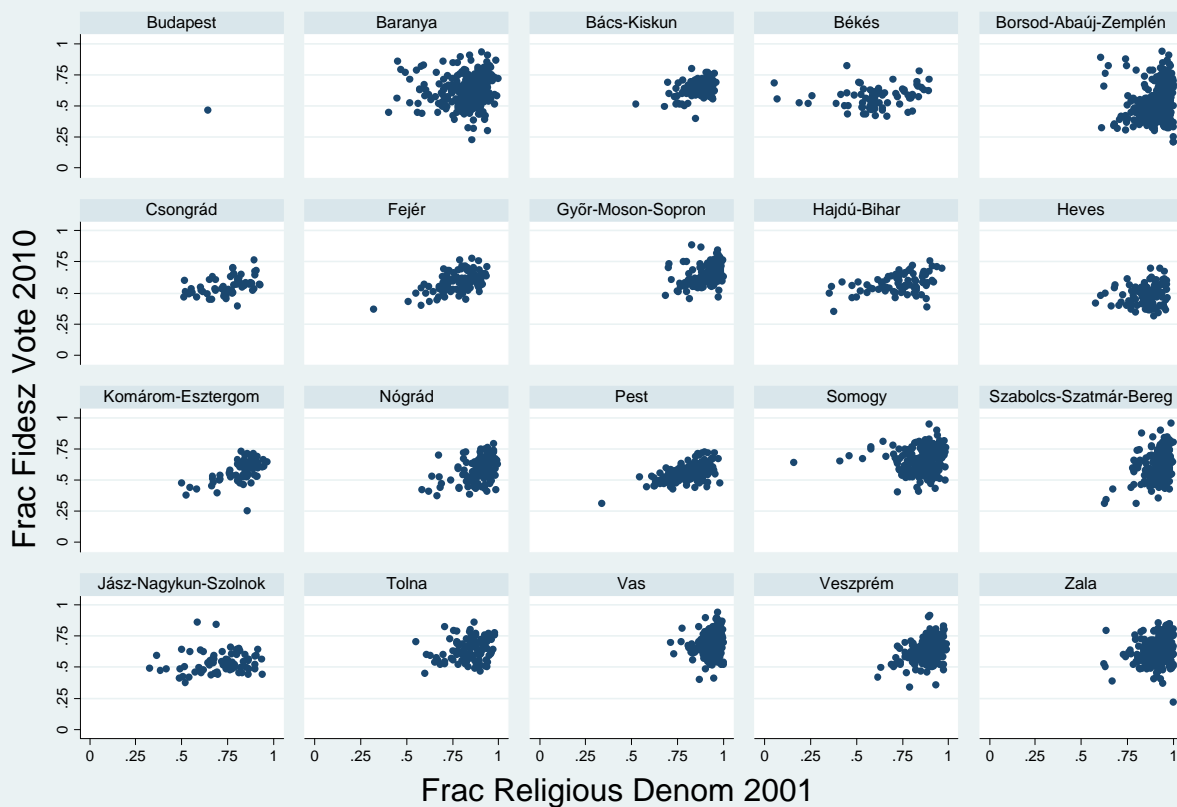
Socialists never recovered their popularity, and lost the 2010 election by a wide margin.

Third there was the lack of a viable alternative party. Between the incompetence of the center-Right and the arrogance of the Left, Fidesz was the only well-known party left standing. It was skillfully able to capitalize on popular disgust with the socialists and fear of the even more extreme right-wing Jobbik party to win just over 2/3 of the parliamentary seats and freedom to amend the constitution.

Deeper Underlying Discontinuities

Liberals have quite understandably reacted in horror to the changes Fidesz is effecting, and in the opinion pages of many of the world's leading newspapers have accused Fidesz of nothing less than resurrecting illiberal and anti-democratic politics. There is more than a grain of truth to these allegations, but we should not be too quick to conclude, as Jowitt suggested, that "demagogues, priests, and colonels"--- not coincidentally the most influential actors of the interwar period, now have a mandate to pursue their radical politics. Whatever the claims to historical authenticity Fidesz and Jobbik might make, the muscular Christian-national politics they advocate are not rooted in the same domestic social bases as those of the 1930's Right. The interwar Right could count on legions of God-fearing, church-going supporters, many of whom were refugees from the then newly-created Habsburg successor states. Today things are different. Remarkably, Fidesz's Christian-national policies are being imposed on a citizenry that no longer respects the churches as it once did. According to a March, 2011 public opinion poll, nearly 30 percent of Hungarians are not religious, a little over half are „religious in their own way”, what we might call „spiritual”, while only around 12 percent follow the teachings of a church.⁴ Nor is it the case that the most religious voters are unified behind Fidesz or Jobbik. Although 55 percent of those (12 percent) that follow the teachings of a church would vote for Fidesz, 25 percent would support the Hungarian Socialist Party, and only 10 percent sympathize with Jobbik. Moreover, 18 percent of Socialist sympathizers follow the teachings of a church, versus only 15 percent for Fidesz and 10 percent for Jobbik. A greater proportion of Jobbik's supporters are not religious (37 percent) than of Socialist supporters (34 percent). Fidesz and Jobbik might interpret these figures as a reason for the state to spearhead a movement for spiritual renewal, but in no way can the parties claim widespread mass enthusiasm for Christian-national politics.

⁴ See TDATA-H57 TÁRKI *Omnibus 2011/03. Social-political attitudes in Hungary among the adult population*. data sheet. Version: 2011-12-20



Graphs by MEGYE 1990

Figure 1 The Relationship Between Belonging to a Religious Denomination and Vote for Fidesz in the 2010 National Parliamentary Election, broken down into scatterplots for each county. Each dot represents a municipality. N=3029.

National representative samples can sometimes mask significant sub-national variation. To gain a richer picture of the relationship between mass religious affiliation and propensity to support Fidesz I compared the municipality-level regional list electoral results for Fidesz from the first round of voting in the 2010 national parliamentary elections with matching data on affiliation with a religious denomination from the 2001 census.⁵ The results appear in Figure 1, which is broken into 20 panels, representing each of Hungary’s 19 counties and Budapest. Within each panel there is a scatterplot of the relationship between the proportion of people (in a given municipality) that „belong to” a religion or religious denomination in 2001 (the horizontal axis) and the proportion of voters who voted for the Fidesz regional list (the vertical axis). Each dot represents a municipality.

Figure 1 is broadly consistent with the aforementioned survey results: the relationship between individual religious affiliation and vote for Fidesz is weak at best.

⁵ I am grateful to Gábor Tóka and Pál Vecsey for providing these data.

This can be seen by noting that in most panels there is no upward trend in the mass of points, which would indicate that municipalities with more religious people were also likely to also support Fidesz. However, there does appear to be some regional deviation from the general pattern, with Fejér, Komárom-Esztergom, and Pest counties in particular exhibiting the positive correlation one would expect given Fidesz's church-friendly policies. It should be noted that the census and aforementioned survey likely tap different dimensions of religious identity. For example, people who are religious in their own way would likely not report themselves as belonging to a religion or denomination. This is advantageous for the present analysis because the census provides a better measure of adherence to established religious traditions, precisely the ones that Fidesz favors.

Given Fidesz's apparent valorization of a time before the communists came to power it would be interesting to know whether in the current distribution of Fidesz support we can see echoes of patterns of rightist support in elections prior to 1948. To lead with the conclusion, there is virtually no continuity at the mass level between contemporary vote for Fidesz and vote for rightist parties in the more distant past. To determine this I merged the 2010 electoral data with electoral data going back to 1939, maintaining constant geographic units.⁶ Fidesz's 52 percent of the 2010 popular vote on the regional lists puts its victory in the same league as that of the rightist Independent Smallholders Party, which garnered 57 percent of the popular vote in the November, 1945 national parliamentary elections. Figure 2, which like figure 1 is broken up into panels representing each of Hungary's counties and Budapest, displays scatterplots of the relationship between the proportion of people that voted for the Smallholders in 1945 (the horizontal axis) and the proportion of voters who voted for the Fidesz regional list (the vertical axis). As before, each dot represents a municipality. A diagonal line has been added to each point to indicate where the two votes would be identical in some municipality. Points above the diagonal line are places where Fidesz performed better than the Smallholders; below the line are places where the Smallholders outperformed Fidesz. If there were perfect continuity between the two votes, all points would lie on the diagonal line.

Figure 2 constitutes strong evidence that whatever the sources of Fidesz's current popularity, they do not lie in deeply-rooted local conservative voting traditions. With the exception of Komárom-Esztergom county, where there is a small but discernible positive correlation between the two votes, there is barely an echo of the past. It is of course true that 65 years separate the two elections, and that during

⁶ For details on this dataset of election results see Jason Wittenberg, *Crucibles of Political Loyalty: Church Institutions and Electoral Continuity in Hungary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

that period there were four decades of state-socialist disruption followed by roughly a decade of wrenching economic reform. However, well into the post-communist transition the pattern of support for rightist parties still exhibited marked continuities with the very same 1945 results.⁷ For all of its rhetoric, Fidesz is not tapping into the same historical legacies.

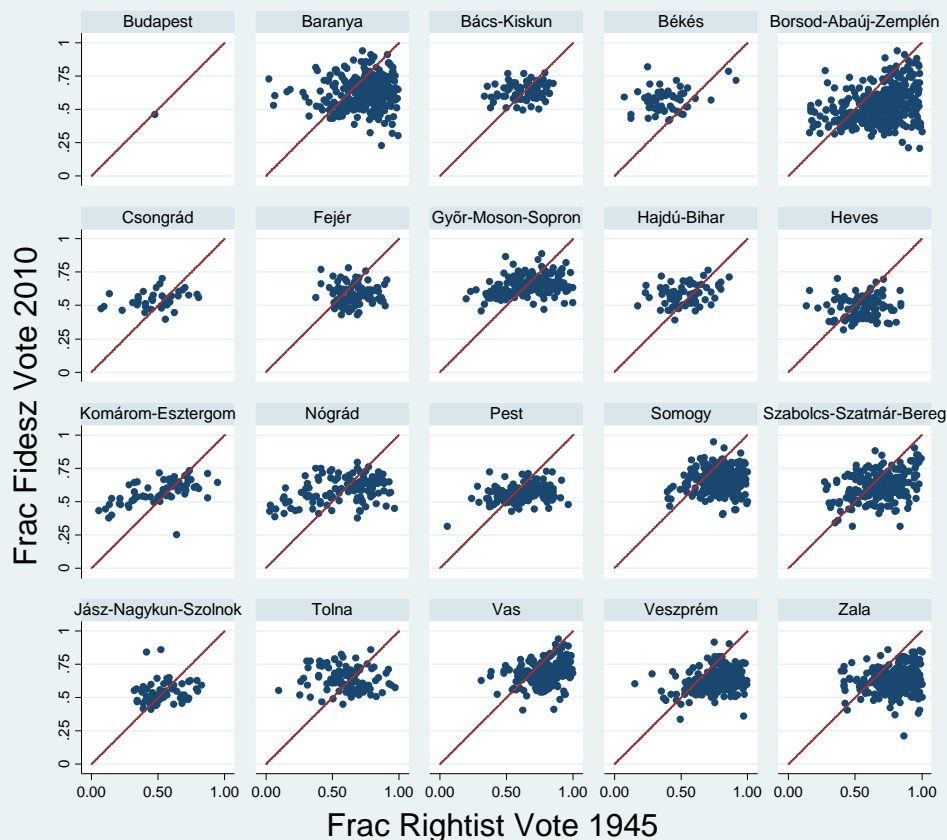


Figure 2 The Relationship Between Vote for the Right in 1945 and Vote for Fidesz in the 2010 National Parliamentary Election, broken down into scatterplots for each county. Each dot represents a municipality. N=3029.

We might put Jobbik to the same test as Fidesz, and ask how much its pattern of support resembles that of its radical right predecessors. The 1945 election will not do because the Allied Control Commission, of which the Soviet Union was a member, only permitted „democratic” parties to compete. Although the Communists were allowed to field candidates, the radical right parties were not. The 1939 national parliamentary election was the only interwar election in Hungary in which votes outside of the several largest cities were cast with a secret ballot. Fortunately, at least from a research perspective, the that election featured a host of radical right parties. Although Jobbik gets mentioned in the same breath as the Arrow Cross, the best

⁷ See *ibid.*

known of these parties, it does not claim to be the successor of any particular such party. Consequently, the relevant comparison to Jobbik is not just the Arrow Cross, but all the radical right parties taken together. Figure 3 displays the results, formatted analogously to figure 2.

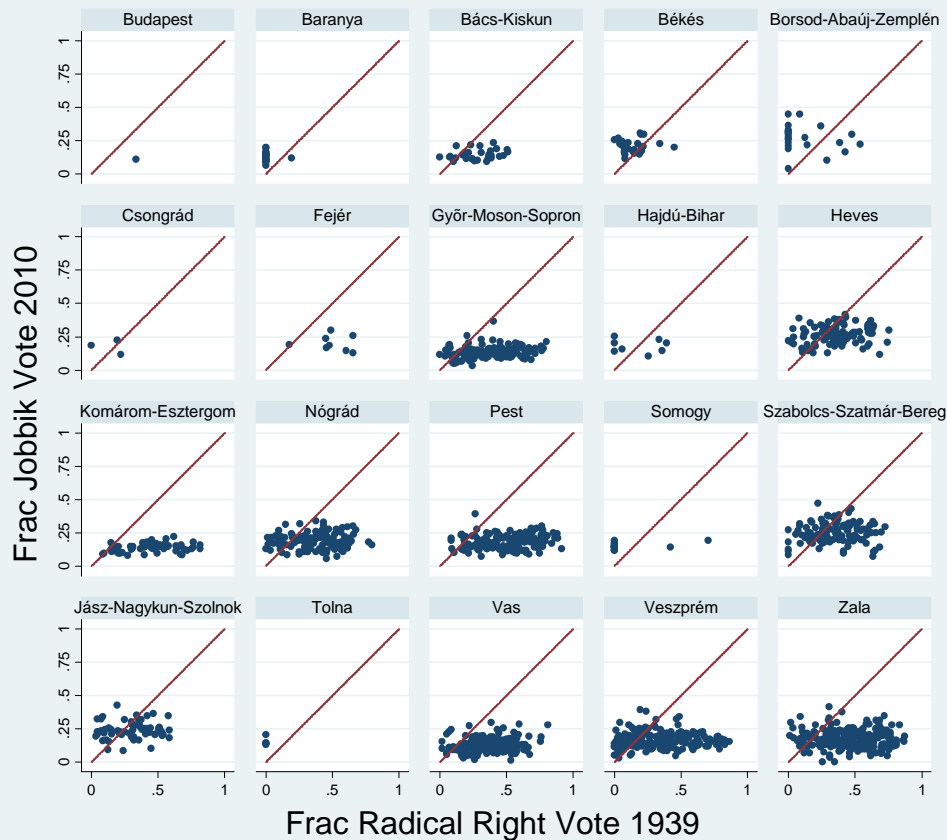


Figure 3 The Relationship Between Vote for the Radical Right in 1939 and Vote for Jobbik in the 2010 National Parliamentary Election, broken down into scatterplots for each county. Each dot represents a municipality. N=1518.

Many of the panels have few municipalities because the radical right competed mostly in the west and north of the country. But examining the results in the 10 counties where the radical right did compete it is difficult not to conclude that the roots of Jobbik support lie somewhere else than in some submerged local fascist tradition. The relationships in Figure 3 for Jobbik are even weaker than the analogous relationships for Fidesz in Figure 2. Rather more remarkably, there isn't even much continuity between Jobbik support in 2010 and vote for the MIÉP party in 2002, with a correlation across municipalities of only .16. MIÉP was the most prominent radical right party before the rise of Jobbik, although its overall popularity never exceeded the low single digits. By contrast, the correlation between Fidesz support in 2010 and vote

for the joint Fidesz-MDF list in 2002 is .66. Jobbik support is not only a break with the distance pre-communist past, but also with patterns of radical right sympathy prior to Hungary's entry into the European Union.

Even if Fidesz (and Jobbik) were building on an historical reservoir of mass support, a return to outright dictatorship is unlikely. Contemporary international circumstances are far less conducive to Hungarian authoritarianism than they were in the 1930's. The rise of Naziism in Germany, among the most advanced countries in Europe, emboldened and legitimized the radical right throughout the region. Today every move Fidesz makes is scrutinized by the European Union, which, together with the US, has already expressed grave concern about the changes Fidesz is trying to effect. Jobbik is rumored to have an international patron, but it is Iran. Jobbik's larger and more established sister parties in western Europe, for whom the Muslims pose a greater threat than the Jews, cannot be pleased with that possibility.

Conclusion

Fidesz and Jobbik disagree on many things, but they both want to remake politics into something that is, if not quite the same as that before the communists came to power, at least is a more up-to-date version of it. Yet as this paper has shown, these parties have a tough road to hoe. Despite appearances, the Right's current strength bears very little similarity with the country's long and problematic tradition of right radical politics. Indeed, much as when the Communist Party came to power, and faced a society largely hostile to the Party's dream of creating socialism, Fidesz and Jobbik face a society that is unlikely to show much continuing enthusiasm for the sort of Christian nationalism being espoused. If this conservative politics does have a future, it will be rooted in a mass base that is very different from the one that underlay its pre-communist predecessor.