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## The rise of European right radicalism: The case of Jobbik

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## ABSTRACT

Based on the qualitative research of elite interviews and narrative analysis of Hungarian documents, the main aim of this article is twofold: (1) to elucidate the transformation of Jobbik from a marginal extra-parliamentary youth focused movement to an influential parliamentary party; (2) to discuss the impact of Jobbik's ascension on the main centre-right Fidesz only as a pre-conclusion. It argues that the rise of Jobbik is not a protest phenomenon that simply demonstrates a social disenchantment with the transitional economy. Jobbik's transformation is a unique post-Communist political development that is rooted in elements of Hungarian nationalism. These national elements include underlying social prejudice against Roma and Jews, a preference for paternalistic economic systems, and even attraction to the historical narrative of mythic Turanism in the debate over the origins of Hungarian national identity. Jobbik manipulates all of these national elements for the transformation of its own party identity, emerging as a main challenger to the Fidesz.

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Observing one of the most conspicuous post-transitional political developments in Hungary, András Körösiényi, the head of the Institute for Political Sciences at the Hungarian Academy of Science, notes that: "Jobbik is not a [phenomenon] representing the continuity of Nazism in Hungary, but an entirely new phenomenon. Jobbik is different from other far right parties in Western Europe" (author's interview with Körösiényi, 13 January 2015, Budapest).

The salience of the far right or the extreme right parties across Europe is nothing new. During the inter-war period, fascist parties and pro-Nazi movements gained a social and political momentum. In the second half of the 1950s, the populist parties that stood against hikes in taxation were gaining ground in Europe. In the early 1980s, anti-immigration sentiment was increasingly vocalised by Europe's radical national parties (Tóth and Grajczár, 2012: 83). Two decades later, and especially since the 2006–2009 European financial crisis, the ultra-nationalists or Euro-sceptic political forces were resurgent. Indeed, these groupings scored stunning victories, or made very significant advances, in both national parliamentary elections and European parliamentary elections (Lodge, 2010; Gagatsek, 2010). It is notable that radical right parties<sup>1</sup> in Europe are exerting an influence on the political narrative with their agenda. Furthermore, these parties have begun to occupy positions in important state institutions and, to shape public opinion (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2013: 236–37; Bernáth et al., 2005; Bustikova and Kitchelt, 2009; Daniel, 2012; Hockenos, 1994; Minkenber, 2002, 2009, 2011, 2013; Mudde, 2005, 2007, 2008; Pirro, 2014; Pytlas, 2013; Rydgren, 2007).

This rise of radical nationalist parties is not confined to post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where nationalist expressions had been forcibly restrained under Communist rule. However, in the period since the political

<sup>1</sup> Although there is no clear-cut definition of the radical or extreme right (Rydgren, 2007: 242), there are certain features and ideologies that such groups have in common. This includes nationalism, exclusivism, welfare chauvinism, and xenophobia (Mudde, 2007: 21). Jobbik's philosophy is broadly based on these ideas, this paper defines Jobbik as a radical right party.

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transition to democracy, nationalists or radical right parties were newly formed or reemerged in CEE. In this transitional context, Hungary has come to be seen as a stronghold of the radical right. The Hungarian Life and Justice Party (HLJP, or in Hungarian: *Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja*, MIÉP), – a party of extreme ethno-nationalist and anti-Semitic views – occupied an influential position in the 1998–2002 Hungarian parliament (Mudde, 2005: 82–84). Jobbik, a party that is, as shall be demonstrated, even more radical nationalist in its legislative programme, wields increasing influence on the mainstream stage. At the outset, Jobbik was a youth focused movement which lacked coherent leadership and was weakly structured. Since 2006 Jobbik has succeeded in significantly raising its profile as a vehement protest party positioning itself against the government and its law and order. Jobbik is now widely viewed as one of the most influential and popular parliamentary parties in Hungary (Bartlett et al., 2012; Bíró-Nagy et al., 2012; Karácsony and Róna, 2010).

With this conspicuous post-transitional political development in mind, this paper addresses the following key questions: What explains the successful transformation of Jobbik from a youth focused movement to an established parliamentary party? What are the impacts of Jobbik's rise on the mainstream centre-right party, Fidesz? The paper argues that the rise of Jobbik is not a protest phenomenon that simply demonstrates the social frustration of a transitional economy. Jobbik's success is a unique post-transitional political development that represents in combination central elements of Hungarian nationalism. These include an underlying social prejudice against Jews and Roma, anti-liberal capitalism (meaning protectionist national capitalism), and attraction to the historical narrative of mythic Turanism in the debate over the origins of Hungarian national identity. Jobbik manipulates all of these national elements for the shaping of its own party identity.

The first section of the paper discusses the origin and development of Jobbik. This examination leads us to understand Jobbik's position in Hungary's party system, and provides an essential background to the context of Jobbik's transformation into an established parliamentary party. The second section is devoted to the factors that contributed to Jobbik's rise. The remainder of the paper explores the impacts of Jobbik's rise on the main centre-right Fidesz party only as a pre-conclusion.

## 1. Development of Jobbik

Founded in November 1999 by a group of university students at Budapest Eötvös Loránd University (Korkut, 2012: 186; Bíró-Nagy and Róna, 2011: 2), Movement for Better Hungary (hereinafter Jobbik) was no more than a right wing youth movement. Initially, Jobbik, led by Gábor Vona and his followers, attempted to find a role within the Civic Circles – a civil organisation closely linked to the mainstream centre right party Fidesz (Lázár, 2009: 16). Yet, Vona soon realised that the Circles did not have an adequate programme for the renewal of 'national radicalism' that Jobbik envisaged (Tóth and Grajczár, 2012: 87–88). Thus, in October 2003 members of the Movement decided to found their own party (Vona, 2011: 60). In its founding statement, Jobbik described itself as a 'principled, conservative and radically patriotic Christian party' with the central aim of protecting 'Hungarian values and interests' (Kovács et al., 2003: 243). The meaning of these 'Hungarian values and interests' is questionable, while Jobbik's political platform was clearly characterised by a form of extreme nationalism. This political orientation was further evidenced when Dávid Kovács, the party's founding president, and his clique decided to form an electoral alliance with the HLJP the anti-Semitic far right party led by well-known populist writer, István Csurka. Under the banner of 'the Third Way Alliance' (Heti Világgazdaság, 2005; Pál, 2005: 3; Nográdi, 2011: 13), the MIÉP-Jobbik group ran in the 2006 parliamentary elections, but won only 2.2% of the vote,<sup>2</sup> failing to pass 5% of threshold to secure seats in parliament (NVI, 2006). Having failed to secure legislative representation in parliament, the newly elected chairman of the party, Vona Gábor, announced an end to 'the marriage of convenience' with the MIÉP (Downs, 2012: 189). With this decision Jobbik signalled that it would go its own way in the upcoming poll.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in the period from inception to the 2006 parliamentary election, Jobbik had little success transitioning from its initial position of a movement-like party into an established one. Instead, it continued to occupy the position of 'pariah'.

On 17 September 2006 when Ferenc Gyurcsány's infamous speech – in which the socialist prime minister lied about Hungary's economic situation – was leaked to the public on Kossuth Radio (Debreczeni, 2012: 97), the centre right opposition Fidesz and, more importantly, Jobbik were presented with an opportunity to revive their fortunes. In Gyurcsány's mind, his speech – delivered at a closed session for rank-and-file members of the Socialists Party – 'We lied in the morning, afternoon, and evening' (Népszabadság, 2007) – was intended as an honest analysis of the economic predicament the country was facing at the time (Debreczeni, 2012: 29–36). However, the prime minister's admission that austerity would be necessary for further social and economic development was met with hostility. This resentment emanated from the opposition and, more significantly, from an infuriated public, who saw themselves as a victim of socialist duplicity. The socialists had promised a better life once they got re-elected and yet they had known all the while that austerity would be needed. Throughout September and October, a series of demonstrations organised by members of Fidesz and Jobbik, and demanding the resignation of the Premier Ferenc Gyurcsány, took to the street (Kéri, 2010: 132–35). In response, on 18 September 2006, President László Sólyom, who observed the situation with deep anxiety, issued a statement in which he declared that the government

<sup>2</sup> After the first round of the 2006 general election, it became clear that the Third Way alliance would soon split up over the matter of its relation with the Fidesz. Kovács implied that Jobbik might support the Fidesz, whereas Csurka vehemently opposed to form a political ally with it (Gréczy, 2005: 1–3; 2006: 2).

<sup>3</sup> Tóth and Grajczár (2012: 88) argued that, immediately after the electoral defeat of the 2006 general election, Jobbik decided to split up with the MIÉP, as they saw that the conspiratorial Jewish dominance theory insisted on by the MIÉP could be no longer effective in drawing further support from the potential constituency.

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