

The approval of the Sargentini report: the beginning of the end for Orbán in the European People's Party?

Flash Report



While Hungary's voting rights are unlikely to get suspended as a result of the article seven procedure, the vote today on the so-called Sargentini Report indicates an important trend: Orbán's declining support in the European People's Party (EPP), the largest mainstream party of the European Union. While an immediate split is unlikely, this can be the beginning of the end of Fidesz's story within the EPP. At the same time, we should not expect an immediate pushback on the policies of Orbán in Hungary, and Orbán can promote his illiberal, anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic agenda even louder both domestically and internationally.

Four takeaways from today's votes

- 1. The stakes are more European than domestic.** The stakes at today's vote were not whether the Article 7 procedure would continue against Hungary due to the state of the rule of law in the country – it is highly unlikely that Hungary's voting rights will be suspended in the European Council. The main question instead was how Viktor Orbán's and Fidesz's party-political position would change on the European level as we are approaching the 2019 EP-election campaign. The goal of Viktor Orbán is to become a significant politician in the European Union, as this would benefit the long-term sustainability and financeability of his regime and serve his personal ambitions the most. This vote shows that it will be difficult via the mainstream of the EU. Additionally, this vote can send an important message to other countries (as well as the vote on Poland last year) that not all illiberal adventures remain without political consequences and can make other member states more cautious.
- 2. Orbán lost supporters within the EPP.** Today's vote can be a turning point in the relationship between the EPP and Fidesz, even if we should expect a gradual rather than an immediate break-up. Voting behaviour indicates that 115 members of the European People's party voted for the report, and only 57 voted against it (with 28 abstentions). It indicates a clear shift from the vote last May, when relative majority of EPP members still supported Orbán. 58% of EPP members voted for the Sargentini-report, 29% voted against and 14% of the group abstained. In last year's vote on the state of the rule of law in Hungary these proportions were: 34%, 47% and 20%, respectively. Orbán lost some of his important former supporters and allies. Most importantly, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz decided to support the resolution (ÖVP abstained on the previous vote last May), and so did influential leaders within the EPP from Germany and France, such as Manfred Weber, Joseph Daul and Daniel Caspary. Manfred Weber, when detailing his position on the rule of law debate, tried to diminish the importance of the Article 7 procedure by picturing it as a „dialogue,“ creating some room for a future solution. Apart from the EPP, we do not see big shifts in the voting behaviour of other groups (see the graph below) – except that the Five Star Movement from EFDD voted for the the resolution this time – last year, they abstained.

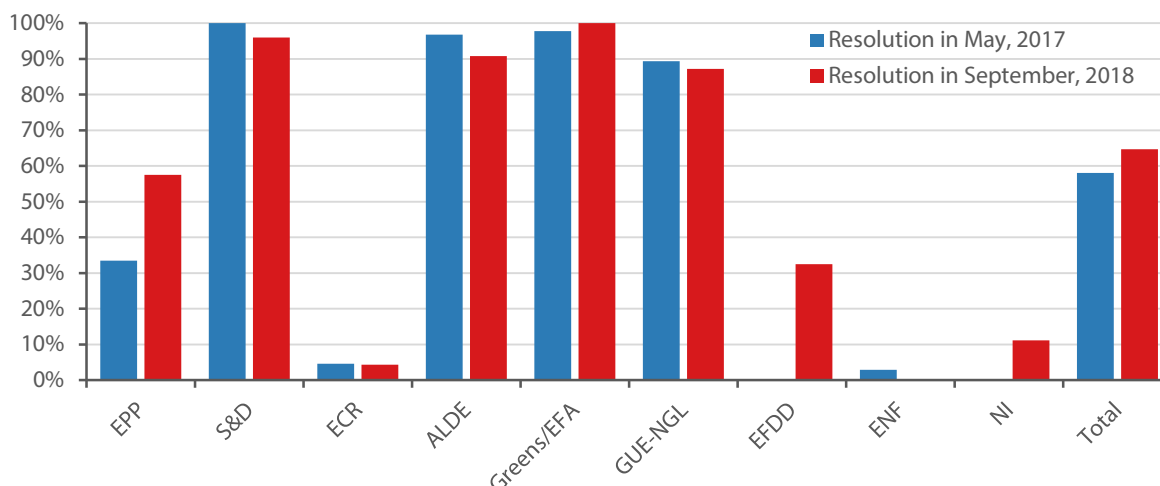


Figure 1: Support for resolutions on Hungary broken down by EP groups (share of votes in favour of the resolution within all votes, including abstentions, in per cent. Source of data: 2017, 2018)

3. Orbán won't change his policies. Orbán's political agenda and policies will remain unchanged.

After his third two-thirds victory in a row, Orbán's willingness to reach compromises declined significantly. Hungarian domestic politics will not change, the elimination of the remaining independent media, the independence of courts, the autonomy of universities and of civil society will continue undisturbed. While the Article 7 vote had some moderating effect on the Polish government, we do not expect it in the case of Hungary. Orbán is not expected to withdraw his decisions until there are European Court of Justice decisions dictating otherwise. Fidesz is going to use a more anti-Brussels tone than ever before in the EP-election campaign, and keep its messages directed against George Soros and his "agents." The party's messages are going to revolve around migration both domestically and on the European level, claiming that everybody who disagrees with Viktor Orbán and criticises his increasingly authoritarian and nepotistic political system – even if it is completely unrelated to migration – is "pro-immigration" and commits treason. Migration is not important for Viktor Orbán for the topic itself and to maintain his popularity domestically, but because it allows him to gain more supporters in Europe and weaken, stop and reverse the integration process by blocking decisions and exploit divisions within the EU.

4. Orbán's main European constituency are the populist and far-right players, not the mainstream.

It was clear already in the debate preceding the vote in the EP that Viktor Orbán's main supporters are anti-EU and Eurosceptic parties, most of which are far-right forces promoting anti-EU and pro-Putin policies. Some of them, as the French Front National, even invited Viktor Orbán as an ally in case Fidesz left the EPP. The real supporters of Viktor Orbán sit in the Eurosceptic ECR, and even more so in the anti-EU EFDD (except the Five Star Movement) and the far-right ENF. It seems highly likely that – even though these groups will be reshuffled due to Brexit – Viktor Orbán's political future lies with one of the successors of these formations due to the fact that he is drifting further and further from the EPP. At the same time, this would considerably deteriorate his political influence and it is almost impossible to imagine that a far-right, anti-EU, Eurosceptic party family can be united and compete with the EPP in the long-term. Although the European populist right is cooperating with increasing efficiency, it remains heterogenous, and there are serious policy differences between them even on migration - see, for example, the widely different situation and interests of Italy and Hungary in the quota issue, and the conflicts between the Italian and Austrian governments.