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THE 2017 REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN SLOVAKIA IN THE ASPECT OF THE PARTY OF THE HUNGARIAN COMMUNITY (MAGYAR KÖZÖSSÉG PÁRTJA – STRANA MAĎARSKEJ KOMUNITY)

ABSTRACT

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In this paper I will overview how the Party of the Hungarian Community (Magyar Közösség Pártja) (MKP from now on) (SMK – Strana Maďarskej Komunity) prepared for the 2017 regional elections in Slovakia in the aspect of the party politics, in order to delegate as much candidates as possible into the regional government. The party mainly focuses on Southern Slovakia. I will also overview what kind of decisions the party made, how it reacted to the Slovakian political scene.

KEYWORDS: Slovakia, MKP, SMK, Most-Híd, Smer, SNS, regional elections, 2017, József Berényi, József Menyhárt, Nitra region, Bratislava region, Trnava region, Košice region, Banská Bystrica region.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will overview how the Party of the Hungarian Community (Magyar Közösség Pártja) (MKP from now on) (SMK – Strana Maďarskej Komunity) prepared for the 2017 regional elections in Slovakia in the

aspect of the party politics, in order to delegate as much candidates as possible into the regional government. The party mainly focuses on Southern Slovakia. I will also overview what kind of decisions the party made, how it reacted to the Slovakian political scene. In Slovakia there were 4,4 million people who could vote on the 4th of November, 2017 (MTI, 2017).

What is the MKP? The predecessor of MKP was formed in 1998 from other Hungarian parties and became the Party of the Hungarian Coalition. The party defined itself as middle – right orientated regional party, and their voters are mainly Hungarians. Between 1998 and 2010, the Party of the Hungarian Coalition was part of the parliament. Between 1998 and 2006, the Party of the Hungarian Coalition was a governing party, from 2006 until 2010 it was part of the opposition. In 2012, they changed their name to Party of the Hungarian Community (Bárdos *et al.*, 2008). In 2011, 458 467 Hungarian lived in Slovakia (Felvidék, 2012).

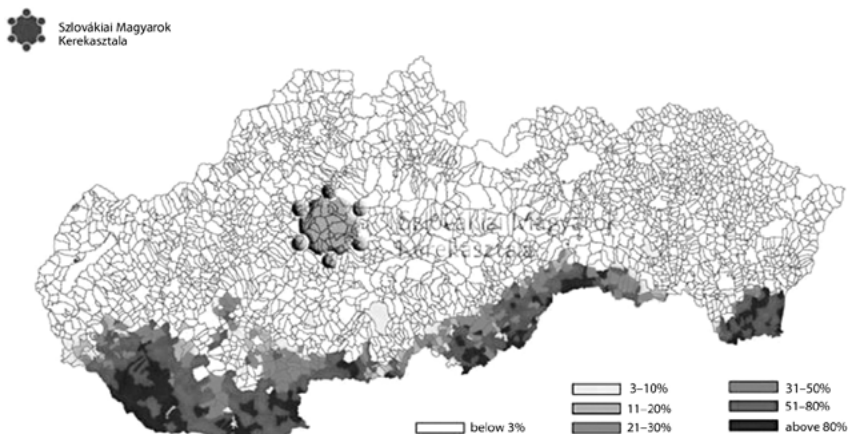


Figure 1. The percentage of Hungarian ethnic population in Slovakian villages in 2011.

Source: (Körkép.sk, 2017, u)

2. Previous elections

In order to have a full understanding, I have to write about the 2016 parliamentary election. In 2016, the party hasn't qualified itself to the parliament because it didn't reach 5% among the voters. The party chairman, József Berényi resigned, as he promised before. The politician mentioned several

changes, that the election was based upon new politicians, fresh faces, and this act of his helped the renewal of the party as well (Hírek, 2016).

The main competitor, MOST-Híd was established afterwards Béla Bugár (for not being elected as the president of the Part of the Hungarian Coalition) and several politician left the MKP in 2009, establishing a mixed ethnic party, the bridge between the nationalities, competing for the Slovakian and the Hungarian voters (Harrach and Rákóczi, 2017).

MKP being a regional party that focuses on the Hungarian voters in the Southern-Slovakian region, this is crucial.

Berényi highlighted that this factor was also significant in the passivity of the voters, which ultimately led to a failure to reach 5%, as it also failed in 2012. He also noted that there was a three party coalition governing in Slovakia in 2016, which could ultimately led to early elections, and as history goes, his hunch was correct, because in 2017, there were problems between the parties of the coalitional government. In this interview he also pointed out, that the party got the same amount of the votes as it had before, hence, the support of the party was stable at this point. He also mentioned that coalition was possible with both Most-Híd and other Slovakian parties (Hírek, 2016).

3. The campaign in different regions, coalitions

In April, 2017 the party president, József Menyhárt arranged a meeting with Béla Bugár in the MKP headquarter, and discussed about the details of a coalition with Most-Híd. The idea of a coalition should have been considered by both groups, because Most-Híd didn't have enough support in the southern regions in order to qualify representatives into the regional government, also it lost considerable amount of Slovakian and Hungarian followers with its coalition to get governing position. The MKP wanted to sustain its stable position in the region (Körkép.sk, 2017, a).

The meetings weren't successful, although their ideas about education were correlating. The Most-Híd in order to gain votes, wanted a long term arrangement, but the MKP only wanted an agreement for the regional elections, however, József Menyhárt pointed out that agreements on a regional level were still possible (Körkép.sk, 2017, b).

Interesting data from the FOCUS agency, that the vote base of the Most-Híd party only consist 44% from the Hungarian population, apx. 74 thousand people while as for the MKP goes up to 105 thousand. The

multi ethnic Most-Híd party didn't get in to the parliament because of the Hungarian voters, however, could have been a help in the regional elections, the article concludes (Körkép.sk, 2017, c).

In the Kosice region, the agreement to have one appointee supported by both parties (MKP, Most-Híd) was still on the agenda, because here, the also governing Smer-SD didn't get support from Most-Híd, but at the end, they didn't agree in this region either (Körkép.sk, 2017, d).

3.1. Bratislava region

In the western part of the country, the SaS, OĽaNO, OKS, KDH and ZZ had a coalition with the MKP in order to gain 6 seats instead 4. This coalition was an opening on the behalf of the MKP towards the opposition, because before that the party was in isolation because of its nationality and regionalism. This gesture later on became a good decision. The SNS – true to its word – had an own appointee, and Most-Híd also, however this party became unwanted among the opposition. In the colours of Smer, Milan Ftáčnik was the contender (Körkép.sk, 2017; e, f, g, h).

None of the previously discussed regions had an MKP – Most-Híd coalition. Most –Híd party lost its popularity – pointed out by Dag Daniš-, referring to its campaign throughout 2015–2016, with mottos like: Can you imagine a government without Smer? We can., basically saying, that they would not govern with Smer. When the governing coalition was established with these parties, the voters felt being betrayed because they were voting against the Smer. It's also common, that the Smer grinds down the smaller parties it has coalition with. The author also mentioned, that the Most-Híd – MKP coalition idea was based against this fate on the behalf of Most-Híd, however, the MKP cleverly waited, and then denied the idea. Later on, this had a huge effect (Daniš, 2017).

Also worth mentioning an event that took place in 2017 august: The national party, SNS threatened Smer and Most-Híd, that the party leaves the governing coalition, even Béla Bugár, president of Most-Híd didn't rule out the chance of an early election. He mentioned the 2016 decision, that the party joined the governing coalition was based upon the sole fact that this way, their ideas and programs ended up in the governing program. In the end, the coalition remained the same, but the idea of an early election explains why Most-Híd wanted to have a coalition with MKP in the regional election, unsuccessfully (Körkép.sk, 2017, i).

One occasion defined the MKP's campaign well, which idea was regional representation. In July, a government report was announced, stating that the R2 highway – which mainly crosses the southern region connecting Lučenec, Rimavská Sobota throughout Rožňava with Košice – in price-value rate is not profitable hence it should not be built. The local people reacted with blockades at Szoroskő. Right now it takes 15 years, because of the bureaucratic system, to establish this road. Worth noting, that since the 2000s, among the people road building is equal with economy prosper, so their reaction is understandable. Interesting fact, Árpád Érsek, Minister of Transport and Construction from the party Most-Híd, also attended this protest with Béla Bugár, basically protesting against the government that they were part of. József Menyhárt, president of MKP reacted, that this project is crucial and the projects delay is not acceptable. He stated that the economic difference between the western, Bratislava region and the eastern regions is great and this road could help to balance the difference. He pointed out, that with the road being built, investors would be more likely to invest in the region, helping its economic prosper. This government report later on was marked as unacceptable by the Prime Minister, Robert Fico, himself (Körkép.sk, 2017, j, k, t; Százaz, 2017, a).

3.2. Nitra region

In Nitra county – where the MKP had the most chance to delegate as much representative as possible – in the end there was a Smer-SNS-Most-híd coalition, and Milan Belica became the appointee for the title, regional governor. This coalition before wasn't guaranteed, because the SNS wanted to have their own appointee in every region, but ended up in a coalition here. Worth mentioning, that Belica's opponent, Tomáš Galbavý, was supported both by Most-Híd and MKP previously, who later on joined the Most-Híd. This agreement on the behalf of the governing parties was a political agreement, because in the region, the support of the MKP – because of the high density of Hungarian population – is strong, so the governing parties mainly focused on the northern area of this region, where the population is mainly Slovakian. The MKP had their own regional governor appointee, Iván Farkas, so they didn't join the coalition of the opposition, which coalition had their own appointee: Ján Greššo (Körkép.sk, 2017 l, g).

3.3. Košice region

In the Kosice region, the MKP had a coalition with the Smer and the Green party appointee: Richard Raši as the regional governor, the Most-Híd didn't support Richard Raši, they had their own appointee, Károly Pataki. Worth mentioning, that only the regional governor was supported by that MKP, the party had its own delegates to the regional government. Their program was the same when it comes to education, infrastructural development including highways and roads. The coalition of the opposition (OLaNO-SaS-KDH-NOVA – Šanca) had their appointee: Ratislav Trnka. The governing coalition was divided, and very good example of that, that the SNS had their own appointee – as the party had it in its agenda – in Kosice region: Jarmila Tkáčová (Körkép.sk, 2017, m).

3.4. Banská Bystrica region

In Slovakia at the previous regional election the regional governor became an appointee of a nationalist – fascist party L'SNS leader: Marián Kotleba. The president of Slovakia, Andrej Kiska encouraged every party, to unite against him, which happened partially. There were two independent candidate. One was supported by the opposition, in the person of Martin Klus, and independent candidate Ján Lunter was supported by the Smer, who later on became the regional governor. The MKP said that the party supports the candidate that has the most chance to win (Körkép.sk, 2017, g, h; Henci, 2017).

3.5. Trnava region

The revitalisation of the party was visible in the Dunajská Streda district, which district delegates into the Trnava regional government. Four out of eight were new faces in the political scene, also, József Berényi, former vice – regional governor became a regional governor appointee. (P. Vonyik, 2017) In the rhetoric, it was crucial, that they wanted to achieve prosperity for the areas populated by Hungarians. The Most-Híd candidate wanted to undermine this rhetoric, and wanted to push the debate to the cultural side – with arguing that the Hungarian population was divided by having two parties, MKP and Most-Híd – while MKP was using economic rhetoric. József Berényi in a live TV debate rejected these

accusations, saying the population is tired of the political trench warfare, and they want to hear reasons (Berényi, 2017).

It was interesting to notice that in the Dunajská Streda district there were less than none competition, many party didn't bother to have appointees, basically giving up the district. For regional governor, Tibor Mikuš independent candidate wanted to get the regional governor title for the second time, supported by SNS. Jozef Viskupič member of the parliament got the oppositions support: OĽANO, SaS, KDH, NOVA, Občianska konzervatívna strana and Zmena zdola (P. Vonyik, 2017; Körkép.sk, 2017, n).

Around the fall of September, the reasons behind the Most-Híd trying to have a coalition with MKP started to unfold: Focus institution research showed that Most-Híd declined 0,8%, while MKP got 0,5% stronger, however this is only 4% of the total population, therefore still below the level to qualify to the parliament. Other governing parties declined as well (Körkép.sk, 2017, o).

Worth mentioning, that the MKP has been supported by the Fidesz – the governing party in Hungary – for a very long time, which fact been said by Iván Farkas himself. He points out, that the education in Hungarian language and the region economic development is crucial, especially when it comes to small and middle sized companies that could help prevent the youth migration which is a huge problem in these areas. In this aspect, the MKP became the bridge between Hungary and Slovakia, being an ally of the opposing parties in Slovakia, and having a good relation with the Hungarian government, this is what József Menyhárt referred as opening towards south (Százaz, 2017, b; Menyhárt, 2017).

Before the elections, they emphasized voters to vote, because they thought, that the voting activity rate was declining among the Slovakian population, initially an increase in the Hungarian activity rate could have resulted more seats. The Hungarian activity rate increased, however, the activity rate amongst the Slovakian population increased; therefore, these effects canceled each other out.

The regional governments has a very crucial role in the country: the lower ranking roads maintenance, running schools, tourism and running social institutions are among the many responsibilities that they have to cover. In this campaign, as it has been increasingly before, Facebook, the social media had a huge role. The candidates had FB pages and were active throughout the campaign: they shared articles, pictures. There were

also posters where they emphasised voting on the candidate, in the case of the MKP, the motto was: Strong representation, strong region (MKP, 2017).

4. Results

Overall the new faces, young politicians did well on the regional election: The previously mentioned Dunajská Streda district shown the results that the party planned: 8 out of 8 people qualified themselves into the Trnava regional government. Other parties were using their resources cleverly when they haven't invested too much effort into this district, and the political attack from Konrád Rigó was fended off from the cultural side to the economical side. He was the 9th on the list. The Galanta district got little attention previously, however their effort resulted 5 seats out of the 7, the 2 remaining seats went to the Smer and to the OĽANO, the Most-Híd didn't qualify themselves here either. Jozef Viskupič became regional governor of Trnava region, as the candidate of the opposition. In the Bratislava region supported by the MKP and other opposition parties, the regional governor became Juraj Drobný. In Nitra region, the governing coalition became the regional governor, but the MKP gained a huge fraction in the regional government, which later on, had a huge impact. In the Štúrovo district, the MKP got all 3 seats that can be gained, in the Komárno district, they got 6, 1 seat went to the governing coalition and 1 seat to the independent mayor of Komárno, László Stübendek, who won with 20 votes against Imre Knirsch, who only got the 9th place, not making it into the regional government. In the Banská Bystrica region Ján Lunter won, supported by the MKP as well, defeating Marián Kotleba (Körkép.sk, 2017, p).

Overall the mobilisation of the population was successful, and the help from civil groups helped the party to gain as many mandates as possible. Also worth mentioning the results of the elections in the aspect of rate of Hungarian population and the mandates gained.

1. **Bratislava region:** 3,97% Hungarian pop. according to 2011 census, overall 3 mandates which had been divided:
 - Bratislava: 1 mandate.
 - Senica district: 13,8% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 2 mandates.
2. **Trnava region:** 21,77% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 13 mandates.

- Dunajská Streda district: 74,98% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, all 8 mandates.
- Galanta district: 35,04% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 5 mandates.
- 3. Nitra region:** 24,56% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 11 mandates.
 - Komárno district: 63,81% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 6 mandates.
 - Nové Zámky district: 33,57% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 3 mandates.
 - Levice district: 24,34% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 1 mandate.
 - Šaľa district: 31,37% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 1 mandate.
- 4. Banská Bystrica region:** 10,23% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 5 mandates.
 - Veľký Krtíš district: 24,01% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 1 mandate.
 - Rimavská Sobota district: 35,95% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 4 mandates.
- 5. Košice region:** 9,44% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 1 mandate.
 - Trebišov district: 26,53% Hun. pop. acc. 2011, 1 mandate (Oriskó, 2017).

5. Aftermath

The election had smaller and greater effects, which effects have yet to reveal their selves; however, I will cover 3 events. The first was firing Imre Knirs from his vice-mayor position at Komárno. He got 20 votes less then Stubendek when competing for the seat at Nitra. Stubendek said that it was hard to work with Knirs, other sources suggest that there was a political battle between the two behind the scenes, which is possible seeing the results (Körkép.sk, 2017, q).

The previously covered coalition with the opposition had it fruits: Igor Matovič, president of the party OĽANO invited the MKP for a possible coalition for the upcoming elections. He said, that the party is a good ally in order to win the election and ultimately, defeat the Fico-government, this way, both Hungarian and Slovakian voters disappointed in the politics and ways of the Most-Híd have their parties. József Menyhárt said that the MKP doesn't reject this offer (Körkép.sk, 2017, r; Menyhárt, 2017).

Last, but not least, a possible Smer-MKP coalition was possible in the Nitra region government, which could have been very dangerous: Iván Farkas could have lost credit in the voters' eyes, and could have diminished further coalition with the opposition. In the end, this didn't occur, and the parties of the opposition were grateful for (Körkép.sk, 2017, s).

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