

FRENCH PRESS ON HUNGARY

MAGDOLNA PONGOR

The period of the Hungarian EU presidency, from January to June, starts in the light of criticism. Beside Hungarian projects, it is internal political issues that make up the major news in French Press. Greatly empowered government, new media law and taxation of multinational companies have been the main themes in the last month. Apart from that, newspapers highlight that the following period is of crucial importance due to upcoming energy policy, minority integration, eastern policy and further enlargement of the EU.

Passing the flag. On 6th January on the official passing of presidency, Belgian PM Yves Leterne declared that Hungary had proved its commitment to freedom several times during its history. After the successful Belgian six months there was still a significant number of steps to take, he added, therefore, he expressed his hope that Hungary would be able to continue in preparing successful decisions.¹ The motto of the following presidency is „Strong Europe”, on the basis economic development as well as human factors.

Euro. The most important issue is the stabilization of the Euro-zone – although Hungary is not part of the monetary union, all 27 member states may be affected by an assumed Greek, Spanish or Portugal crisis.²

Energy. The synchronization of energy policy, on agenda from 4th February, is highly important. According to Leterne, innovation and creativity will be demanded in order to solve the problem, and urged Hungary to introduce a “European brand”.

Budget and enlargement. It is going to be the challenge of the upcoming months’ to vote on long-term budget for 2014-20, and also to facilitate the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen Area. The integration of the neighbouring countries is a Hungarian priority; however, opinions differ here from the one of Germany and France.

Laurent Wauquiez Minister in Charge of European Issues claimed in an interview to Le Croix French daily newspaper³: Schengen means responsibility; therefore, possible corruption must be taken into account. The Minister does not consider the two countries ready for accession; but supports their membership after reaching necessary standard levels. He considers the greek border greatly important, that is the reason why he “hails every effort taken to deal with immigrant pressure”.

Hungary would welcome the accession of Croatia to the EU in March, but the views of members on this point are not indifferent on this matter.

Eastern partners. Negotiations on cooperation might recommence with six former Soviet Union member states in May. Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Prussia and Georgia may tighten their bonds with the EU; talks are to be supported by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.⁴

Minorities. Roma integration appears on the program as a Hungarian priority, in which issue Hungary could play a major role. The preservation of multiculturalism is an issue concerning all Europe. As Wauquiez mentioned: “Hungary has interesting experience on this matter”, and this way, Hungary could “bring positive force to the debate”. He also stressed that “France should not underestimate the new Mid-Europe.”⁵ The way he sees this, the culture of Egypt also includes the peaceful co-existence of several religions, which needs to be supported by Europe, with special regard to Copt Christianity.

Along with the presidency, some concerns have risen related to the host country’s home policy.

¹Gessant, Camille-Cerise. UE : la Belgique passe le relais à la Hongrie *EurActiv.fr*, 2011. 01. 07 "La Hongrie a déjà prouvé plusieurs fois au cours de l'histoire sa forte dévotion envers la liberté, c'est pourquoi la Belgique donne le relais avec espoir: bien que la présidence belge ait présenté des résultats, la présidence hongroise aura encore beaucoup à faire"

² Gessant, Camille-Cerise. "bien que la Hongrie ne fasse pas partie de la zone euro, la stabilité de la monnaie unique est importante pour tous les Etats-membres et les attaques contre la devise ne sont pas encore terminées".

³ Berthelot, Benoît ; Maillard, Sébastien. Laurent Wauquiez : « La Hongrie est prête, si besoin, à corriger ses lois » *La croix*, 2011. 01. 07.

⁴ *La Hongrie prend les commandes de l'Europe .Ouest-France*, 2011. 01. 03.

⁵ Berthelot, Benoît ; Maillard, Sébastien. Laurent Wauquiez : « La Hongrie est prête, si besoin, à corriger ses lois » *La croix*, 2011. 01. 07.

Government. Several voices criticise the government's unusually strong authority and are not certain whether the hosting country of the EU correspond to democratic requirements. According to *Le Monde*, central-left daily newspaper, "Europe is alarmed at PM Orban's power, supported by his conservative-nationalist party, Fidesz, which won the 2010 May elections with an overwhelming majority"⁶. *Figaro* leftist daily paper reports: "the reason for the fear in EU derives from the fact that authoritarian power appears in a country which has recently started its democratic development."⁷ "Conservative Viktor Orban, who gained the image of a "nationalist provocator" in Brussels, opposed to 'EU's or IMF's dictating (his) behaviour' in last spring. After all, will he be able to 'find healthy balance between conduct and leadership', as Minister of Foreign Affairs Janos Martonyi promised?"⁸

Media. The issue most attacked is the media law, coming into force on 1st January, which does not have a positive effect on opinions about the country.⁹ The issues regarded as most worrisome are political influence on NMHH (National Media and News Authority), its wide and not well-defined authority, the obligation to reveal information sources to NMHH and high penalty fees.¹⁰ "The Hungarian government, headed by a debated democrat, who is, in addition, widely known for his anti-European views has just announced a scandalous anti-liberal law against Hungarian media."¹¹

Commissioner for European Telecommunication Neelie Kroes, considering the composition of NMHH, expressed her "concerns" and "doubts" related to its independence.¹² Her spokesman Jonathan Todd added: "balance" according to the new law touches every aspect of the press, although in common practice it regulates only television broadcast.¹³

On 4th January, Fillon's French government asked that Hungary change the text, as it violates the freedom of press in his opinion. Viktor Orban, cut in the quick, retorted to the criticism in his response on the 6th.¹⁴ "I would like that French government returned to reality and valid reasons." That afternoon, Paris clarified that they did not have the intention of "giving lessons." Even Barroso, visiting Budapest on 7th could not convince Orban, who claimed that "the law does mean censure or the limitation of expression of political opinion, but shaping responsible media, and aims at eliminating vitriolic, offensive, defamatory and sometimes anti-Semitic manifestations."¹⁵

The way Wauquiez sees this¹⁶, it is important not to confound internal policy with the problems of the Unoin, and despite the media law's unlucky timing, Hungary is ready to negotiate on this matter.

In his speech on 19th January, EU representative Daniel Cohn-Bendit pointed out that "media cannot be balanced." The vice-president of the Green Party also declared that the "nationalist-populist" prime minister "does not understand the essence and structure of democracy." In his response, Orban initiated professional

⁶ Van Renteghem, Marion; Ricard, Philippe. *La présidence hongroise de l'Union européenne suscite l'inquiétude de Bruxelles*. *Le Monde*, 2010. 12. 30.

⁷ Mével, Jean-Jacques. Orban persiste et signe après les remontrances de l'UE. *Figaro*, 2011. 01. 07. „Au-delà, l'UE s'inquiète d'une dérive autoritaire dans un pays membre qui passait naguère pour un modèle réformateur.”

⁸ Kovacs, Stéphane. *La Hongrie prend la tête de l'UE pour six mois*. *Figaro*, 2010. 12. 31. „Le conservateur Viktor Orban, qui a gagné à Bruxelles une image de «provocateur nationaliste» depuis son refus, au printemps dernier, « de se laisser dicter notre conduite» par l'UE ou le FMI, réussira-t-il à «trouver un équilibre sain entre l'intendance et le leadership», comme l'a promis son ministre des Affaires étrangères, Janos Martonyi ? »

⁹ Berthelot, Benoît ; Maillard, Sébastien. Laurent Wauquiez : « La Hongrie est prête, si besoin, à corriger ses lois » *La croix*, 2011. 01. 07.

¹⁰ Szabo, Bernadett. *La Hongrie débute sa présidence de l'UE sous les critiques*. *Reuters/Le Monde*, 2011. 01. 03.

¹¹ Bruay-la-Buissière, Michèle Baubet. *Hongrie*. *Le Monde*, 2011. 01. 08.

« Ce alors que le gouvernement hongrois - présidé par un très douteux démocrate, doublé d'un antieuropéen notoire - vient de promulguer une scandaleuse loi liberticide contre la presse hongroise... »

¹² Bruay-la-Buissière, Michèle Baubet. *Hongrie*. *Le Monde*, 2011. 01. 08. « Ce alors que le gouvernement hongrois - présidé par un très douteux démocrate, doublé d'un antieuropéen notoire - vient de promulguer une scandaleuse loi liberticide contre la presse hongroise... »

¹³ Gobet, George. *Loi hongroise des médias: Bruxelles demande des "clarifications" à Budapest*. *Les échos*, 2011. 01. 21.

¹⁴ Mével, Jean-Jacques. „Paris se retrouve dans la ligne de mire d'un règlement de comptes entre Budapest et le reste de l'UE. Mardi, le gouvernement Fillon avait demandé à la Hongrie de «modifier» un texte qui, dit-il, porte atteinte à la liberté de la presse. Viktor Orban, piqué au vif, a répliqué jeudi en conseillant à Paris d'en rabattre: « J'aimerais que le gouvernement français en revienne à la réalité et à des arguments rationnels. » Dans l'après-midi, Paris a précisé « ne pas vouloir donner de leçons ».

¹⁵ Mével, Jean-Jacques. „Lui et ses alliés du parti majoritaire Fidesz se défendent de «réintroduire la censure» ou de «limiter l'expression politique». Il s'agirait plutôt de responsabiliser des médias hongrois qui manient, plus qu'ailleurs, le vitriol, l'insulte, la diffamation et, à la marge, un antisémitisme latent. »

¹⁶ Berthelot, Benoît ; Maillard, Sébastien. Laurent Wauquiez : « La Hongrie est prête, si besoin, à corriger ses lois » *La croix*, 2011. 01. 07.

debate and suggested that European and Hungarian matters be handled separately. Socialist president Martin Schulz shared the views of Cohn-Bendit. In his opinion, the aim of the media is to control and “disturb” politics, not the other way round.

Hungary received a two weeks’ moratorium to prove that the new law corresponds to European norms.¹⁷

Tax. The second debated law concerns the taxation of multinational companies. Regulations affect mainly German, French, Czech, Austrian and Dutch firms, which handed in a written protestation sent to Brussels. Effects of the law are still under examination.¹⁸

Nationality. Some researchers claim that giving Hungarian nationality to Hungarian minorities living outside the borders has a negative effect on the country’s relationships with neighbouring states.¹⁹

Philosophers. The procedures started against philosophers of Szeged are seen as a way of silencing opposing opinions by Libération. According to the indictment against Ágnes Heller and her companions, they received a sum of money equivalent to 1.8 million Euros for a fictive project (Platon-translation). Others see this as a response to Heller’s acts against media law.

The governments of the 27 member states, representatives of the parliaments, and the EU Commission have been addressed in a call for help, written by former anticommunist personalities Václav Havel, Petr Uhl, Árpád Göncz, Miklós Haraszti, György Konrád and Adam Michnik. „What the Union tried to hinder and what many believed to be impossible now seems to happen: we can witness the birth of an antidemocratic power inside the European borders. (...) Disrespect of a country’s basic laws means humiliation for all Europe.”²⁰

In summary, the French press presents a two-sided image of Hungary at the beginning of the presidency in 2011. In accentuated Unionist issues, such as the stabilization of the euro, energy policy, minority integration, common effort is to be expected. When it comes to the enlargement of the Schengen Zone or the EU, French viewpoints differ from the one of Hungarian priorities. Lastly, internal politics have come in for substantial criticism of the major daily and weekly newspapers.

Sources:

Le Figaro – circulation : 333,405 copies daily, centre-right²¹

Le Monde - circulation : 321,086 copies daily, centre/centre-left

Libération - circulation 134,511 copies daily, left

La Croix - circulation 103,796 copies daily, (n. i.)

Les Echos - circulation 136,063 copies daily, left-liberal

Le nouvel observateur - circulation 515,429 copies weekly, centre-left

*

institute@southeast-europe.org

www.southeast-europe.org

© DKE 2011.

Pawlak, Justyna ; Peto, Sandor; André Henri-Pierre. L'UE met la Hongrie en demeure sur sa loi sur les médias Le Nouvel Observateur, 2011. 01. 21.

¹⁷ « La Commission européenne a mis en demeure la Hongrie de démontrer dans un délai de deux semaines que sa loi contestée sur les médias est conforme à la législation européenne, a annoncé vendredi un porte-parole de la Commission »

¹⁸ Szabo, Bernadett. „Sur ce texte, Budapest a fourni mi-décembre des explications écrites à la Commission, qui sont actuellement à l'étude. Bruxelles a reçu à ce propos une plainte formelle signée des patrons de treize grands groupes industriels allemands, autrichiens, néerlandais, français et tchèques. »

¹⁹ *Dérive autoritaire en Hongrie.* Ouest-france, 2011. 01. 05.

²⁰ La Bruyère, Florence. *Hongrie : Orbán cible les philosophes.* Libération, 2011. 01. 21. « Dans un appel adressé aux parlementaires européens, aux membres de la Commission et à tous les gouvernements des Vingt-Sept, d’anciens opposants au communisme comme Václav Havel, Petr Uhl, Árpád Göncz, Miklós Haraszti, György Konrád, Adam Michnik, dont plusieurs passèrent des années en prison, lancent un cri d’alarme (à consulter sur le site Iprotest.hu) : «*Ce que l’Union européenne voulait empêcher, et ce que beaucoup croyaient impossible, prend chair : une démocratie antilibérale est en train de naître à l’intérieur des frontières de l’Europe. [...] Si des droits fondamentaux sont bafoués dans un pays, cela humilie tous les Européens.*»

²¹ ESI (European Stability Initiative). *The French EU Enlargement Debate. A manual with information and contacts.* Supported by Fund of the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Open Society Foundation. 2008. November