*Information about interviewee:*

*Ábel Ravasz is a member of parliament for the political party, Bridge (MOST-HID) and is the plenipotentiary for Roma community in Slovakian parliament. The interview was conducted in Bratislava, Slovakia.*

*R= Respondent – Ábel Ravasz*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: What are the objectives of the party?

R: This party has existed for 7 years or maybe 8? It is very a particular political party, as it is an inter-ethnic party. Which is new, certainly in Slovakia, perhaps also in the European context. Not many parties have this inter-ethnic profile. Inter-ethnic means that, because you will have parties in different countries, which don’t have an ethnic character, explicitly or implicitly. Then you have ethnic parties which focus on ethnicity, and that is the main profile. But to have a party which basically tries to work with the ethnic topic and integrate varies ethnic groups as a goal, that I think is relatively new. Stemming from this fact, I think that there are 3 main policy areas that MOST-HID works with. The first one is obviously minority issues, the second one is regional development, and the third is rule of law. Now we have relatively strong presence in the parliament, in the legislation but also in the executive, and we decided to form 3 working groups, the people in the parliament and the in the executive and our cabinets perhaps and basically these topics are framed through cabinets. A cabinet for minority policy, I happen to be the chairman of that. There is one for regional development and there is one for rule of law. Much of what we think and much of what we would like to achieve, has been recorded as part of our electoral programme, our policy platform, civic vision. Which is possible more important, than the other election programs this party have had before. It was a long process, we tried to look at what we think about different topics and I think, both deductively and inductively basically just, you know, connect these patches of opinions that we have. We knew that we thought A, and we knew that we thought B, so that perhaps implies C. So, we just tried to connect those dots, and I think that programme is a very serious template for minority party’s political position.

I: What is the relationship like with you and the Hungarian state?

R: It is not good. So Fidesz has been in power since 2010, MOST-HID was formed in 2009, so almost throughout the whole existence of this party, we had to work with Fidesz as a partner. It has not been very easy, or productive on a general level, Fidesz does not accept MOST-HID as a legitimate partner in the Hungarian-Hungarian dialogue. They have publicly and privately categorized as a mixed party, as a party with some Hungarian elements. Their primary partner is MKP-SMK and they have basically, again and again, expressed this belief. They have actively supported the MKP, policy wise, financially certainly, with ideas, and they are extremely reluctant to work with us. That being said, almost since the day we were formed, we have government in Slovakia with Mr. Fico. The relationship between Mr. Fico and Mr. Orbán has been good and constructive. Which also involves not opening a lot of minority issues, and so they are frozen in their current shape and no body works with them, but they are not brought to the forefront. So, there is next to no cooperation with Fidesz and MOST-HID. In some policy areas, you will find cooperation through European frameworks. For example, we had the EU presidency for a while. My own experience was that the Hungarian partners were very happy to help us achieve our goals. I have only words of praise to say about cooperation in Brussels in the working parties. But when it comes to a political level, it is next to nothing.

I: Why do you think this is?

R: So, I think this is strategic. Fidesz has this belief that they need to have a network of reliable partners in the Hungarian diaspora communities and they prefer those parties to be ethnic parties. Since they have a partner that they can rely on here, in MKP, they just don’t need us. The second one is more pragmatic, which is that MKP is traditionally had a close relationship with Hungary and Fidesz. That is not true of MOST-HID. We are almost, I can say, fully independent of Hungarian influence. I mean influence from Hungary. We are not influenced by Hungary, which makes us less, in their view, of a reliable partner. We are not contingent on support from Budapest, therefore the relationship we have with Fidesz, should be on equal terms, that is something they are not very comfortable with.

I: Some I have spoken to have suggested the dual-Nationality legislation passed by Hungary in 2010 was done to gain political leverage abroad. Would you agree with this?

R: I would, I would. I don’t think it was illegitimate diaspora strategy. But yes, certainly, in such a strategy, they are not very comfortable with our party. I think that they understand our Hungarian surrounding countries, as a field in which Hungary has a central position and they are basically recruiting and financing actors that can further the Hungarian influence in the surrounding countries. MKP is a good partner in this, as they basically believe that they can further the cause of Hungarians in Slovakia, through external interference, both from Brussels and Budapest. Our opinion is that you need to be good at home, so our problems have to be solved here in Bratislava. Obviously, we are happy to have external support, but we bargain and barter here. That doesn’t really suit Fidesz. So yes, I think that the assumption that they are trying to build clients, is basically right.

I: How was the counter-legislation from the Slovakian government has in effect reduced the potential leverage Hungary is able to gain in Slovakia?

R: Yes. I mean. I don’t think dual citizenship was ever going to be very successful in Slovakia. I remember I did an analysis a few years ago for a political party in Hungary. If you look at the four countries with the highest number of Hungarians. You look at how sexy this legislation is. For Ukraine, it is extremely good for them to have citizenship. The best situation is Serbia. It is outside of the EU, so the EU passport is very attractive, and Serbia doesn’t prohibit dual citizenship. That is a yes, yes category. Is it allowed, yes, is it useful, yes? Then you have the two side points. The Ukraine is it allowed, no, is it useful, yes of course. It is not really persecuted in Ukraine. So many would have dual citizenship with Romania and Russia and whatever. Many Ukrainians will take dual citizenship. Then you have Romania, where it is possible and somewhat useful, and they are EU but not Schengen. Then you have Slovakia, where it is not possible and not useful. Your passport has the same value in Hungary as it is in Slovakia. It was never going to be that successful, but with the ban, they reduced the number of Hungarians in Slovakia who took taken it. People who would have taken this from Hungary, were those who have an emotional and symbolic attachment to Hungary, and some who work in Hungary. But it would not have been as widespread as it was in other countries. The counter-law was effective in cutting the numbers.

I: What are your opinions on the Hungarian economic development plans here in Slovakia?

R:I know some details. I know that it is going to target the networks that Hungary has an experience working with. For example, the Protestant church, some of the larger civil society organizations that they like. Certainly MKP. From a personal standpoint, I am happy for every Euro or Forint that arrives in Slovakia, whatever the source. I had a meeting with the chairman of MKP quite recently, and there as my position as penitentiary for Roma communities. I told him that I am concerned about the way some of that money is going to be employed. We have a suspicion, that much of that money will go to produced segregated kindergarten at schools. They are going to try form white-Hungarian schools and kindergartens and the state-run schools will be for non-white Hungarian speakers. That model is already in place in Voldova, where the Hungarian state school is 100% Roma. The Hungarian religious school is 100% white. We have had a lot of trouble with that locality ever since and we feel that the new kindergartens and new schools will follow this model. That is a concern. If the investment package will follow this kind of logic, basically try to cut off Hungarians from other parts of this country, I have my concerns. Money is money. Much of it will be spent well, but we will have to deal with the other elements.

I: Why is this tolerated?

R: It is free money. There is usually a few who try to curb foreign influence in this country. Certainly, this is seen as capacity building in the south by Fidesz by MKP, it is not seen as subversive, it is seen as capacity building. MOST-HID does not have the resources or interest to block this. I don’t think the Slovakian parties are concerned about this. Not much counter-effort. Much of this will be done through civic-society organizations and church. To open the financing of civil society is a whole different can of worms. It is a very popular topic. But not with us. If we start to go down this road, then the losses will be much higher than the gains. My personal position is to wait and see. We can do a lot of good stuff for Hungarians in Slovakia from a government position, so we are not concerned.

I: What is the objective for Fidesz? What is there intention?

R: It is not an either or, I think. It is both instrumental and symbolic. I think certainly, these guys do believe, that Hungary has a responsibly for their citizens. I know that they have a system of clienteles. I also wouldn’t discount the importance of brain drain. There is something that we nominally agree, but substantially we disagree. Fidesz really thinks of Hungarians in Slovakia, certainly in Romania, as a potential source of manpower. They were happy to bring additional Hungarians to Hungary. We think we should succeed here at home. We are not very happy to see a population decline, or our best going away to Budapest. We would be very happy to stay in a Hungarian minority here in Slovakia. Nominally Fidesz would not say ‘come home’ but many of their policies, the stipends that they give, the free high-school and university education for those that the stay in Hungary, these are all forms of brain-drain. I have come to believe that these are not by accident, this is done on purpose, this is what they want. Who would say they want to weaken these communities? That is not a standpoint you can take. Fidesz is also not monolithically. There was an interesting position by someone in the Hungarian opposition, that the changing conditions in Hungary are manifested in that the primary field of conflict is not between political parties, but within the governing party. Of course, that person, tried to show that this as a developing authoritarianism in Hungary. That is not the point here, but that there is a wide range of opinions within the party. But I believe that the people who deal with this policy, do not share the same opinion as the ministry of foreign affairs or international trade. I think there is already a very obvious indication of what they think about foreign policy, that it should be about the economy. I don’t know the numbers, but I imagine that business between Hungary and Slovakia has never been this good.

I: Are you categorized as an enemy of Fidesz?

R: Well there is a typology of political partners. There are three types of party in Fidesz’s understanding. The first is their partner, the second is tolerated, and the third is banned. The three ‘T’s in Hungarian. The first group are those they really rely on. MKP. Back when I wrote this in Romania it was MP and Turkish and in Vojvodina in VMSZ and one of the small Ukrainian parties also. Then there were the ones they could basically tolerated. The MNDS was the most prominent of these. Some of the smaller parties in Vojvodina also and then their ones they would happily disband if possible. We are the most prominent of those. We are a thorn in their side. The second Ukrainian party, they very actively tried to collapse on itself. Nominally the policy of the Hungarian government is they are partners with the ethnic parties in the Carpathian basin. That is simply not true. They have strong preferences. The MNDS is an example of how this change. It is not a fixed thing.

I: Could this change?

R: No. Partially it is because of the very stable, fixed nature of MKP voters. That party has received 4% of the popular vote 3 times in a row. It is not just the same numbers, it is the same people, really the same guys. Of course, some die, and new ones come. I am pretty sure it is the same people. That is a stability, they can produce mayors, they can produce regional party deputies. They can produce people that can influence regional, local policy. They will cut their deal directly and they will work in the networks with MKP. They are very happy with that. MKP has a strong working relationship with civil society organizations. Practically with the cultural society of the Hungarians in Slovakia. Nevertheless, Fidesz has accessed all kinds of networks through MKP. It is not something I would like to see quoted form me. But MKP is a vessel of Fidesz, they have zero space to move, they do what they have to. They are not going to get that from us. We don’t need their money. We don’t need their campaign managers and we don’t need their advice. We can take it. But not as vessels but as partners. That was their problem with MNDS. MNDS were also strong. They were a governmental party several times, they had their own senators and whatever, and they don’t need Fidesz. The current leadership however is very submissive, MKP was somewhat sidelines and Turkish has been natured for a while. Yes, you can cut a deal with them. But we don’t need that at the moment. I don’t think we will ever need this.

I: How are Fidesz perceived here?

R: There is a strong correlation between party preference in Slovakia and the view of Fidesz. MKP voters like him. HID voters don’t think him. There is this correlation. Traditionally left-leaning voters in Slovakia have voted either us or Slovakian parties. They don’t like Orbán. Right-leaning Hungarians do like him. There is this kind of correlation here. There is some support of Jobbik in Slovakia too. The only diaspora community were Orbán wouldn’t win an overall majority of the votes, is Slovakia. And that is why they are not so fast to resolve the dual citizenship here. They would not improve their electoral position by getting the Hungarian Slovakian voters. They are okay with the current state of affairs. Any momentum to change the dual citizenship legislation in Slovakia has come from Slovakia or European leaders. It is a different type of community. I think the only fair comparison in terms of strength of community is Romania. Traditionally Hungarians in Slovakia have not been a marginals group. I am not trying to say the situation is optimal in terms of minority rights. If you go to Hungarian cities in Slovakia, you see the cars and houses and shops, it is not that bad. We are not desperate. I think this is what irritates Fidesz the most. People here are at least as much well off in Hungary, as in Hungary. They just don’t have the leverage.

Many high-ranking politicians here are able to pull off a fascinating combination of being a civil society leader at the same time. It really does fascinate me how the leader of a cultural institutions can be the vice-president of MKP. It really does show how far civil society organizations and political parties have merged. MKP is very deeply rooted in these organizations. These institutions, like Forum institute are financed by Budapest.

I: Is Hungarian media received here in Slovakia?

R: The Hungarian communities are border side, so there is no problem with listening to or watching Hungarian state media. Which is of course a concern for us. We don’t really get that media. MKP does. People here have a mixed media consumption; they consume both Hungarian and Slovak media and the older groups consume more from Hungary. There is also a Hungarian media from Slovakia, Internet and radio portals. I don’t have the numbers, but I think it is 1/3, 1/3, 1/3. It is a mix.

I: Is there propaganda?

R: I think this is not even a question. We did an analysis of Hungarian media after the 2012 elections and MKP was overrepresented 10 to 1 as opposed to MOST-HID. Whenever we appeared it was jeopardised, critical or conflicted and MKP has a free reign of political messaging in Hungarian media. So yes, I think that is a fair accusation. Anyone will find hard to deny in the face of numbers. What I do also think, that people here take Hungarian state media with a grain of salt.

I: Has this always been the case, or since 2010?

R: It came in 2010 and has worsened. 2010 was bad and got worse in 2012. Whatever we get is pro-Fidesz, pro-MKP. Fidesz has basically consumed the media space in Hungary. I think you can be sure that there is propaganda. 100% of what comes through the border is that kind of propaganda. Basically, the media here in Slovakia is in much better shape. There are concerted efforts at trying to ruin that, but it is relatively good. Speaking from the government position, we get a lot of flak from the state media, and that is good. That is not happening in Hungary.

I: Do you think you will ever change your position regarding Fidesz?

R: Past the point of no return. We are not clowns. We will not ally with them when they are strong, so why would we do it when they are weakened. VMSZ take a very pragmatic business-like attitude to their relationship with Fidesz. If they can cut a deal they will. I believe the dual citizenship was done with good intentions which can then get them votes. It is a win-win.