

Budapest Is Using Diplomacy to Fight for Democracy

Article by Benedek Jávör

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Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has lost control over his country's capital. While there are signs that the illiberal leader will do all in his power to hurt the city, the opposition is using the potential of city diplomacy to highlight the other, more democratic side of Hungary. In January 2020, we spoke with former Green MEP Benedek Jávör, head of Budapest's representation in Brussels, about the prospects and challenges for Budapest under green-left leadership.

Green European Journal: Following the victory of Mayor of Budapest Gergely Karácsony – a member of the green-left Dialogue (Párbeszéd) party who ran in the October 2019 municipal elections as the joint candidate of the Hungarian democratic opposition – you were appointed head of Budapest's representation in Brussels. Can you tell us about this position?

Benedek Jávör: Budapest's representative office in Brussels was established in 2003. Having such an institution in the EU capital is quite normal considering that most European capitals regularly raise issues at the European institutions. In many countries, even rural areas have representations in Brussels, as many EU regulations and decisions directly affect the life of municipalities.

What's more, the presence of Budapest in Brussels is now clearly justified by Hungary's political situation: following the success of the opposition in Budapest the municipal elections, the national government and the leadership of the capital have a different political colour. Currently, the Hungarian government did not start to put pressure on the capital's leadership immediately, but in the long run we expect the government to take steps that will complicate the work of Mayor Karácsony. The government might introduce new regulations or withdraw financial resources. One of the most important tasks of the representative office will be to find as much EU funding as possible for Budapest to compensate for the resources and opportunities that may narrow under Orbán's government.

With Budapest's scarce resources, was it an obvious move to keep the Brussels office running?

The new Budapest leadership has a firm foreign policy vision: it wants to put Budapest back on the global diplomacy map and it expects the Brussels office to run a more ambitious, strategic and active operation. The role of regions and municipalities has been steadily growing in international relations, but Budapest has so far been completely excluded from this diplomacy boom – the previous city leadership essentially had no international relations.

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We want to make up for that, and fortunately we have found very good partners in the leadership of the Visegrád

Four capitals, who are also run by politicians from opposition parties and often encounter the same problems and opportunities as Budapest. We want to work closely with them – not only in financial terms but on a wide range of issues. In this context, it's important to highlight that, following Karácsony's victory in Budapest, the capital of an illiberal, populist and Eurosceptic country is now run by a Green politician. I hope that this can give us the opportunity to strengthen green politics in Hungary, and to create a form of cross-border cooperation that can help bolster green politics in Eastern and Central European countries.

What has the representation done so far?

The office had almost no publicity in recent years, so we had to raise our profile. We have already launched our social media and Budapest will refurbish its online presence to allow the Brussels representation to have its own website. Since mid-December, when Karácsony announced that I would lead this mission, there has been more talk about the activities of this office than in the past 10-15 years put together. Although we will not have such an intense and spectacular presence as some capitals that occupy whole buildings and regularly host events and cultural programmes, it will be much more visible than in the past.

On top of the two existing employees, I plan to employ one more person to apply for grants. Another task for the near future is to move the office to a different location. Currently we are based in the Hungarian Development Centre, together with some state institutions and state-owned companies. In my view, this poses serious risks to the successful operation of the office.

The mission has already assumed advocacy activities: after the Hungarian daily *Népszava* reported that the government is trying to divert EU funds from the capital, we turned to the Commission to request that they do not change to the next seven-year budget in a way that would hurt Hungary's opposition-run cities.

The Hungarian government claims that there are no such plans.

They denied it, but I have seen a copy of the presentation that the government gave to the European Commission on December 10th. It outlined a plan that would give the government the right to reallocate money to regions of its choosing. It would be possible for them to withdraw funds from Budapest and other cities run by the opposition.

In the new European Commission headed by Ursula von der Leyen, Hungary has managed to secure the enlargement and neighbourhood portfolio. Why was this so important for Orbán?

In recent years, Viktor Orbán has been thinking far beyond the borders of Hungary and has been experimenting with exporting his illiberal model to other countries. He wants to exert a stronger influence in South-Eastern Europe. Hungarian investors are active in North Macedonia and Slovenia, where they have bought shares in extremist right-wing media outlets. A new commissioner with close ties to the Hungarian government who can oversee the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies is an effective means to gain further influence.

Strengthening its regional influence is a logical step for the Hungarian government. What is quite incomprehensible, however, is why Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has given in to the demands of the Hungarian government and offered the enlargement and neighbourhood portfolio to the Hungarian commissioner. Back in September 2019 when the first Hungarian candidate, László Trócsányi, was rejected by the European Parliament, she had an opportunity to change the Hungarian portfolio. That's why I believe that it was no accident that von der Leyen, despite all the objections, gave the neighbourhood and enlargement policy area to the Hungarian delegate.

What will cooperation with the other Visegrád Four (V4) capitals look like?

On December 16, the mayors of the V4 capital cities met in Budapest and signed a joint declaration called the Pact of Free Cities. The image of the region is detonating in Western Europe. Increasing numbers of people perceive this region as corrupt and open to populist and illiberal tendencies. The consolidation of this image is not only quite unpleasant and humiliating but also brings concrete disadvantages – for example, when planning for the next seven-year EU budget. This region has another, much more open side – deeply to committed Europe, diversity, and combatting climate change – which these big cities represent.

Even though they come from different political backgrounds, the mayors agree on many issues. The mayor of Warsaw comes from the Civic Platform party (a member of the centre-right European People's Party group), Prague is led by a politician from the Pirate Party (whose members joined the Greens-EFA group), and the mayor of Bratislava is a representative of the Progressive Slovakia party. Yet while the political background is quite diverse, there has been little disagreement on the core values of democracy – and they have identified other issues in the Visegrád capitals that require similar action.

Could you give an example?

There is a common understanding that a larger proportion of EU funds should be directly accessible to big cities, not only because some member states may try to deprive cities of EU development funds due to political reasons but also because many current challenges – such as tackling climate change – require quicker access to resources.

It is unfortunate when the EU imposes specific obligations on cities – such as the decarbonisation and electrification of urban transport – and then hands over funds to governments to distribute them. This leads to tensions even in countries where governments and municipalities are on good terms, not to mention the case of a city like Budapest. Together with the leaders of the V4 capitals, we are calling for a post-2020 budget where funds can be directly accommodated to the cities' tasks and responsibilities. In the longer term, we want to expand this lobbying activity beyond V4 cooperation. We want to find additional partners, such as the mayors of Zagreb or Bucharest but also the leaderships of Vienna, Paris, and Barcelona.

Capitals tend to move in a more progressive direction than the rest of the country. In a situation where big cities will be the engines of progressive politics, how can the Hungarian opposition avoid a renewed polarisation between cities and countryside?

About 40 per cent of Hungary's gross domestic product is generated by Budapest, so its development benefits the country as a whole. The country will not be able to make any significant progress unless Budapest moves forward. The fate of the capital and the countryside are interconnected. If national politicians hurt the capital, the nation as a whole will suffer. But we do not want to use EU funds for Budapest or represent the interests of the city in a way that is to the detriment of rural Hungary.

The capital therefore seeks close cooperation with opposition mayors in the countryside, as nearly half of the 100 largest municipalities were won by opposition candidates. We are not trying to aggravate the conflict between Budapest and the countryside, but to use Budapest as a trigger that moves the whole country towards a successful, sustainable development path for the 21st century.

One of the first steps of the new leadership in Budapest was to declare a climate emergency. Why was this necessary?

The climate emergency is a political declaration that reflects the commitment of the capital's leadership to combatting climate change. There is little time to act if we want to keep climate change under control. It indicates that the capital will give priority to environmental policies.

As far as practical measures are concerned, the new leadership is still in the planning phase but there are already some concrete ideas. We are negotiating with the European institutions to launch a programme for efficient buildings that we hope to finance in part through grants and in part with loans from the European Investment Bank. This would be a complex renovation programme for 10 000s of households in Budapest that could achieve significant emission reductions. We are also planning large-scale transport developments such as replacing the ageing public transport fleet.

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The situation in Budapest is tragic in terms of air quality. Hungary has been the subject of infringement proceedings for more than 10 years. Approximately 16 000 people die prematurely from air pollution in Hungary each year. Urgent action is needed.

Climate action and air quality measures are closely linked. Just think of increased green spaces: not only does it sequester and store carbon dioxide, but green spaces make a significant contribution to improving air quality by filtering pollutants. They reduce urban heat island effects, as the temperature in green spaces can be 4-5 degrees Celsius lower than on paved areas.

What are the competences of the city government in Hungary?

The municipal system in Hungary was highly centralised in the past few years, with many competences moved to the central government. However, some important decisions remain in the hands of the city together with the district-level local governments including investment decisions, development and construction plans, planning permission, and many social, cultural and public institutions such as water supply, waste management, and the management of green areas. Fundamental education and health services are municipal responsibilities, as are public transport systems. This opens up many possibilities for the new leadership in Budapest.

Budapest has a housing crisis and so social housing development, hopefully with the involvement of European funds, is a priority. There is a completely new approach to access to housing: instead criminalising homeless people, we believe in providing help and assistance to reintegrate them. Mayor Karácsony already secured additional government resources for the supply of medical diagnostic equipment (such as CT scanners) in Budapest's healthcare institutions. A lot can be done – of course, for that we need good cooperation with the districts, the EU, and, last but not least, the Hungarian government.

What is the impact in Budapest of the moves to curtail the powers of mayors?

It has serious impacts on finances and the overall room for manoeuvre. Currently, only about 1.5 per cent of tax revenues generated in Budapest stay in the capital; the rest goes to the central budget. In terms of room for manoeuvre, let me give you one concrete example: Budapest's new subway line was funded by the EU under the condition that the capital introduce congestion charges. The previous city leadership (under former mayor István Tarlós of Orbán's Fidesz party) sabotaged this for nine years. The new mayor's office is committed to a properly enforced fee collection system, but it requires the government approval, and, for now, the government is blocking those decisions.



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