

The Hungarian Opposition's Cautious Battle for Budapest

Article by Krisztian Simon

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In municipal elections this October, the Hungarian opposition stands a chance of winning back Budapest from Viktor Orbán's far-right Fidesz party. For the first time since 2010, the democratic forces are united. A tough campaign awaits, but with a positive message and some lessons learnt from the Istanbul mayoral race, the opposition hopes to overcome the major obstacles in its way.

Istanbul is the role model for Budapest's opposition. The united opposition's candidate for mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, travelled to the Turkish capital in August to learn from Ekrem Imamoğlu's team and is reportedly determined to adapt the Istanbul mayor's strategy of "radical love" to Hungarian conditions. Imamoğlu became Istanbul mayor in June 2019, ending 25 years of government party rule in the city after a fiercely contested re-run election. Karácsony, a member of the green, social-democratic Dialogue party, has said in interviews that the experience of Istanbul will inform his volunteer and campaigning strategy. However, the most important lesson from Istanbul is that the opposition was able to stay united despite its differences and forge a strong message without demonising the opponent's electorate.

The Hungarian opposition has a decent chance of winning the municipal elections on October 13. The united message is still not there and the campaign remains sleepy. But the coalition has succeeded in organising a primary process, in which voters could pick their preferred mayoral candidate for Budapest. In most of the smaller electoral districts, in the capital as in the countryside, the main opposition parties have agreed to stand behind a single candidate.

The capital tends to be more progressive than the rest of the country, and ruling party Fidesz's support was always weaker there than elsewhere. That puts Karácsony in a stronger position in Budapest than he was in as a 2018 prime ministerial candidate – but he is still not leading in the polls. A poll from late August by the pro-government Nézőpont Institute reported 51 per cent support for the Fidesz candidate István Tarlós and 43 per cent for Gergely Karácsony. A mid-September poll by the Publicus Institute saw Tarlós ahead at 37, Karácsony on 34, and 25 per cent undecided. With the election weeks away, winning is not impossible for the opposition but it will be a struggle.

Green issues on the agenda

Besides the longing for real democracy, better healthcare, and tackling corruption, the opposition campaign centres on the environment. Both Hungarian Green parties, Dialogue and Politics Can be Different (LMP), performed badly in May's European elections and lost their seats. But the municipal elections are an opportunity for them to regain momentum.

Karácsony has spoken out against the government's environmentally destructive development plans. His campaign promises to plant trees all over Budapest and establish a 525-hectare "great forest" in the south of the city. Current mayor Tarlós has responded by appointing a city official in charge of green infrastructure. Rather than coming up with a real climate strategy, this official's main task seems to be to campaign by rebutting the opposition's

“hysterical” remarks about the need for trees and green spaces in Budapest. The government’s Liget Budapest project, which would transform the City Park into a new museum quarter, is one of Budapest’s main environmental controversies. Some of the city’s cultural institutions would be moved to the area and three per cent of the park’s 6500 trees would be cut down. Recent years have seen protests against this development project and clashes with on-site security.

The environment is a contentious topic in national politics too. For many years, Orbán’s Fidesz party was one of the few populist parties in Europe that was willing to acknowledge the dangers of climate change. The outlook of a climate catastrophe even played into the prime minister’s narrative about the future. In 2012, Viktor Orbán described a horror scenario where the wars of the future were fought over access to drinking water. Hungarian President János Áder even hopes to one day join the United Nations as a top climate official.

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But in recent years, the discourse has taken on increasingly denialist tones. Although Hungary’s official aim is to become carbon neutral by 2050, the government has refused to support the EU’s 2050 target. Wind turbines are basically banned and the solar energy sector is used to enrich friendly oligarchs. The Russian-built Paks 2 nuclear power plant will provide energy in the long term, the construction of which Orbán referred to as the precondition for the country’s climate goals. The position of the state secretary for environmental protection was abolished in 2014, after the state secretary spoke out against the Paks 2 project. Since then, environmental experts have been largely excluded from official climate discourse.

The reasons for the government’s hostility are twofold. First, like other Central European countries, the Hungarian leadership believes that a climate-neutral economy would be less competitive and that economic growth would slow. Second, environmentalism is seen as the left-wing, progressive counter-narrative with the potential to divert attention from the populists’ obsession with immigration. Government-supported television stations are now straining to indoctrinate the masses with the new sceptical mind set. Hosts regularly deny the man-made nature of climate change, play down the significance of the Amazon fires, and attack Greta Thunberg’s activism.

This newly developed climate denialism could easily backfire – and if used smartly, could play in the hands of the opposition. The invented threats supposedly posed by refugees and immigrants were able to easily mislead Hungarians, who barely had any experience with immigration. Climate change, on the other hand, is already seen as a threat, and its effects are perceived on people’s daily lives. In the last years of socialism, Hungary had strong environmental movements and polls show that Hungarians are more concerned about the environment than other Europeans, although they are more likely to say that they make no efforts to save the environment.

A recent poll conducted by Závecz Research, the Demnet Foundation, and the news website *Index* showed that the overwhelming majority of Hungarian respondents feel strongly about the environment. 88 per cent said that climate change is a threat to human civilisation. 82 per cent agreed that the climate is among the most serious problems of our times. 77 per cent recognised that serious changes have to be made to our way of life. The pollsters also found that climate denial is relatively rare in Hungarian society. Only about 10 per cent of respondents stated that they do not care about the climate. 0.3 per cent denied the existence of climate change completely and 0.2 per cent labelled it an exclusively natural phenomenon.

Surveying the field

Opposition hopeful Karácsony has a mixed record as the mayor of Budapest's 14th district. In office since 2014, some progress has been made on social issues: his municipality provides subsidies to less well-off residents and, unlike in other districts, homelessness is not a criminal offence. However, his critics complain of poor infrastructure investment and Karácsony's failure to tackle corruption in the city council. The incumbent Tarlós is widely seen to be more experienced, having spent 9 years as mayor of Budapest and another 16 leading Budapest's 3rd district. Tarlós is also considered to be more autonomous than most Fidesz politicians. He has proved willing to pick fights inside the party and has stayed out of corruption scandals, making him acceptable to some people who disagree with Orbán on the national level.

Two other opposition candidates are running for mayor of Budapest. Fidelitas, the youth wing of the Fidesz party, has already decorated the city with billboards featuring Karácsony and the other candidates blazoned with the message "Budapest is no Circus! Let's not leave the city to them."

The reality TV star Krisztián Berki is the less serious of the two challengers. He polls around 1 per cent and many commentators believe that he was hired by Orbán's party to divide the opposition. Others think he wants to create a buzz around his new TV show. The other contender, commentator Róbert Puzsér, used to be backed by the far-right Jobbik and the Green party LMP. Although the parties officially withdrew their support after he refused to participate in the pre-selection process, he retains 4 to 7 per cent support, potentially enough to critically weaken Karácsony. The Puzsér's programme is built around a green message: he promises to create a "pedestrian Budapest" and ban most cars from the city centre.

Playing with a stacked deck

Hungarian political system is another considerable challenge for the opposition. The political scientist Gábor Filippov has labelled Hungary's government a "competitive authoritarian regime." The opposition encounters serious obstacles in competing for power, but a strong enough alternative would still stand a real chance of beating Orbán.

As in most hybrid regimes, civil liberties and the requirements for free and fair elections are still formally respected. Citizens can vote as they wish. Demonstrations can be organised and articles critical of the government can be published. But other, more subtle methods are used to keep the government in power. As the political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have explained, these include limiting opposition access to resources, media, and even the law.

The opposition in Hungary has restricted access to campaign funds and many sympathisers are reluctant to volunteer out of fear that they might face retaliations at work. Whereas the government can afford to buy voters' loyalties with gifts: pensioners recently received a voucher for utility bills worth 9000 Hungarian forint (27 euros). The vouchers came with a letter explaining that the government's strong economic performance had made the bonus possible.

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Disparity in media access manifests itself in the creation and maintenance of partisan state-owned media outlets (which have replaced public service broadcasting) and the governing party's influence over private media. In the

run-up to the election, opposition politicians and candidates (except those from the far-right Our Homeland movement, not part of the joint opposition) have not been invited onto public broadcasters and government-aligned media have spread rumours about the opposition's attempts to commit electoral fraud. The police have also searched the campaign centre of the opposition candidate in Budapest's 8th district due to allegations that his team was using an illegal database of voters.

Opposition supporters are also concerned that electoral success would lead to some form of punishment. Municipalities are heavily dependent on the goodwill of the central government. Since Orbán became prime minister in 2010, the powers of Budapest's mayor have been cut, and it is possible that the municipality will see its funding slashed if voters do not re-elect Tarlós. The prime minister's office has already threatened that an opposition victory would invalidate Budapest's 1000 billion forint (3 billion euro) agreement with the central government.

Electoral algebra and the downsides of victory

Taking all these factors into consideration, the outlook is uncertain. The success of opposition cooperation in Istanbul (despite Turkey jailing opposition candidates, members of civil society, and journalists) gives reason to hope that Orbán will not be there forever. The electoral algebra may prove to favour opposition candidates, but there is also a risk that some self-interested voters will fear the potential downsides of an election victory. Some may calculate that, in the short run, it is better to have Orbán's man in power than a weak opposition candidate.

The last years have also taught voters to be cautious. During the 2018 general election campaign, opposition candidates and supporters believed that Orbán might even lose his parliamentary majority. In the end Fidesz gained another two-thirds majority, a result unexpected even by Orbán and his party. The current election carries less political weight, but could have a great symbolic value for those hoping to oust Orbán. If the opposition can secure key municipalities, Budapest in particular, it could be the push it needs before the next parliamentary election.



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