

A United Opposition Ready to “Bring Back Politics” to Hungary

Article by András Jámber

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Hungary's opposition parties stand united in the run-up to the April 2022 national elections. We spoke to activist and former journalist András Jámber, a candidate for the new left-wing progressive movement Szikra (Spark), about developments within left-wing politics in Hungary, social issues under Orbán, and the prospect of a win at the polls for a united opposition.

Green European Journal: Why did you decide to leave journalism and stand for election as a Szikra candidate?

András Jámber: After the draft of the so-called “slave law” [an amendment to the Labour Code which drastically increased the maximum number of overtime hours] was made public in 2018, I realised that the impact we could have as journalists in Hungary was very limited. This led to my resignation as editor-in-chief of [left-wing news outlet] *Merce.hu*, which I founded. I was then looking for other ways to serve my community, and was already convinced that a coalition bringing together all of the opposition parties could put an end to the current system.

I joined Szikra because I saw it as more than just a single-issue left-wing initiative. The movement was set up prior to the 2019 municipal elections under the name Szabad Budapest (Free Budapest) to support the greener, left-wing candidates running for mayoral office in Budapest at the time. These included András Pikó (8th district), Krisztina Baranyi (9th district), and Gergely Karácsony, who ran for City Hall. All were successful.

Why was it necessary to create Szikra instead of joining an existing movement or party?

I used to be a member of the Green party Párbeszéd (Dialogue) and, if I'm elected, I will join the Párbeszéd parliamentary group. I also have links to other parties. However, none of them does politics in a way that aligns with the values and grassroots approach of the very vivid left-wing scene in Hungary. That's why it was important for us to create an independent identity. We also wanted to connect left-wing media outlets, cultural centres, research institutions, and advocacy organisations, give the knowledge generated by these different institutions more visibility, and foster their development. And finally, we wanted to attract greater public support. An independent political arm was essential for this.

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What can you tell us about Szikra's membership?

Szikra members have typically been young, middle-class intellectuals who are strongly left-wing. But now, in the run-up to the elections, older and working-class people have also joined the movement. Almost all have been "into politics" for a long time, but for many this was restricted to following developments in the news. Only very few had previously been members of parties or movements. One of the big questions now is whether Szikra can break out of its leftist-intellectual cultural bubble and find ways to allow diverse cultural spheres to coexist within the movement.

Does the country's communist past influence the public perception of left-wing parties in Hungary?

I see no sign of that. Anti-communism in Hungary is nothing more than a slogan of identity politics; it has no real substance. In the case of Fidesz [Viktor Orbán's governing conservative party], for example, it would be very difficult to talk about real anti-communism. There are people in the government who collaborated with the communist regime, and Fidesz members have repeatedly voted against legislative bills aiming to provide access to communist-era domestic intelligence records.

I would add that there is no link between our members and the [1949-1989] communist one-party regime. Of course, there are political figures who we consider as role models, such as Anna Kéthly [a social democratic politician who was one of the first female members of the National Assembly of Hungary and was appointed minister during the Hungarian anti-Stalinist uprising of 1956] or key figures of the pre-1918 labour movement. But other than that, we have no organic connection to the left-wing politics of the past.

What is the state of social justice in Hungary?

Social justice is generally in very bad shape – in Hungary, but also in the world as a whole. Politics is increasingly plagued by short-termism and dictated by the latest newsflash, sometimes going as far as to resemble cyberbullying. It is therefore less able to tackle critical, systemic problems or issues of importance to particular communities. An important task for Szikra is to leave behind the media-centred approach favoured by other parties and work out how to talk about real politics again. Obviously we aren't planning to come off social media, but we want to use it to raise awareness of important social issues rather than simply to gain thousands of "likes".

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What are the most pressing social issues?

I would say that climate change, exorbitant housing prices, the problems experienced by

the Romani minority, and a lack of workers' rights are the most pressing issues in Hungary today. The effects of climate change are particularly visible. My three-year-old saw snow for the first time this year; in my childhood there would be snow on the ground for the whole winter. Meanwhile, city squares in Budapest are becoming unbearably hot in the summer. There is no government policy on climate adaptation to make the city more liveable. Neither is there an agricultural policy that supports local agriculture or small farmers. Instead, we have a policy that favours Orbán-associated oligarchs and runs counter to all kinds of climate adaptation goals.

Regarding housing, Hungary is in the grip of a sizeable real estate bubble. We have a high proportion of foreign investors and a strong Airbnb presence, and global rises in construction costs have hit Hungary particularly hard. There have been virtually zero governmental efforts to mitigate the problem. In fact, the governing party's introduction of the Family Housing Allowance scheme (CSOK), which subsidises the construction or purchase of homes by families with children, has inflated the bubble even further. On average, young people spend between 50 and 70 per cent of their income on housing. As a result, 62 per cent of 18 to 35 year olds live with their parents. The only way most young people can own property is through inheritance or with parental support.

Another crucial issue is the "Student City" development. In 2019, an agreement was reached with the national government on the construction of affordable housing for more than 10,000 students in the 9th District of Budapest. This would have been virtually the only major housing project in the last 12 years and could have slowed the rise in rental prices associated with the housing crisis. But the government decided to back out of the deal and build a campus of [Shanghai-based] Fudan University on the site instead, funded almost exclusively by Chinese loans. [Following protests, the project has now been put on hold until after the upcoming elections.] The implementation of a housing development project of this level is a top priority for us.

In the case of the Roma, we need a social development programme that can preserve their cultural identity, help break the poverty cycle, and combat racism. The final issue is workers' rights. At present, the Hungarian economy is focused on attracting foreign capital, with cheap labour and extremely limited labour rights.

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How is the current government dealing with the problems faced by Roma people? This issue is a priority for them too, on paper at least, and they also have a social development policy of their own.

The government does indeed have a form of social development policy, but this is used to build and reinforce crony networks. Covert recordings were released in which the state secretary responsible for social mobility set out what he expected from Roma leaders in the

run-up to the elections. In return, they were promised companies, jobs, and management positions. Roma vote-buying is often discussed, but it is worth noting that this is only possible because they haven't received anything from the Hungarian state over the last 30 years. Roma people face serious difficulties in accessing education, employment, and healthcare, and many live in settlements that lack infrastructure. Meanwhile, they don't see how their vote will make a difference to their lives, so it should come as no surprise if they agree to exchange it for money or food.

For the past two years, you have worked at the opposition-run City Hall. Do you think the opposition is prepared for national-level government?

For the past two years, we have practically been at war with the government. Local authorities' resources and independence have been limited to an extent that I believe is unprecedented in Europe. The budget available to Budapest's municipal government is 20 to 30 per cent lower than it was two years ago. In addition, if a Hungarian municipality wants to take out a loan, it needs the government's approval. So far, City Hall has not received permission to borrow. As a result, we can't even buy the electric buses for which we have already secured an exclusive contract.

However, even in such challenging times, the opposition has demonstrated that it is ready to govern. Here, too, a five-party coalition has to be managed – and it clearly works. A lot of people took jobs in City Hall or other municipalities and have been able to learn how government functions, and how to get things done. As a result, we are much better prepared than we were four years ago. And of course, despite the struggle, we have achieved some visible results. These include the renovation of key public buildings, the establishment of a new climate department in City Hall, the launch of numerous tenders in the field of climate adaptation, and the installation of drinking fountains and public toilets. A lot of small changes have been made to make our city more liveable.

In addition to funding cuts, there has also been a serious smear campaign against City Hall. How well have you been able to handle this?

From Western Europe, it is very difficult to imagine what is happening here in Budapest. Not so long ago, certain individuals with close ties to the government invited employees of the City Hall treasury and others known to be sympathetic to the opposition to an informal discussion. They secretly recorded a seven-hour conversation with them and then edited the footage to make it appear as if the opposition government was involved in the embezzlement of public funds. The recordings were then released and commented on by an unknown man in a Guy Fawkes mask on social media. The government has spent hundreds of millions of forints (around 1 million euros) disseminating the allegations, even though there is no evidence that any of them are true. Meanwhile, an army of trolls is flooding the social media profiles of all opposition politicians, pushing the same message.

Interestingly, the quotes that are intended to be incriminating come almost exclusively from the government sympathisers that initiated the meetings. One of the key figures, described in the pro-government media as a kind of “*éminence grise*” of the Left, was previously the accountant of Viktor Orbán. In addition to the corruption claims, he alleges in the recordings that German money is funding the opposition through organisations such as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

Dealing with these allegations has been very difficult. The recordings were released just after Gergely Karácsony lost the opposition's prime ministerial primary in October 2021, so the staff and leadership of City Hall were already exhausted. We insisted early on that the claims were untrue, but there was not enough money on our side to effectively counter the government's propaganda. Now, several months later, opinion polls show that opposition and undecided voters no longer believe the allegations. But it took time to reassure them.

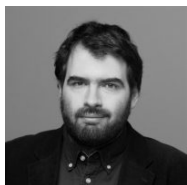
Included in your manifesto are promises to provide free housing for young key workers and to expand the network of shelters for victims of domestic violence. Do you think they can become reality if the opposition wins the election?

Yes, I do. One of the opposition's key priorities is to reverse the budget cuts that have affected municipalities over the past two years. For some, this will mean a 30- to 40-per-cent increase in funding. It is already existing practice for local governments to try to attract public service workers, police officers, kindergarten teachers, and social workers with public housing, but this is hampered by the lack of housing. The manifesto of the united opposition also includes a major housing development programme to be implemented with EU funds. Regarding the expansion of shelters, this is a project of huge importance of which the benefits to society are far greater than the costs involved.

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A few months ago, it seemed that Szikra's membership was not totally behind [independent conservative] Péter Márki-Zay as the opposition's candidate for prime minister. Has the situation changed?

Almost everyone accepted Péter Márki-Zay straight away, but they did not all fully stand behind him. Now, I'd estimate the level of support at over 90 per cent. This could soon rise to 100 per cent. I believe that the overwhelming majority of opposition voters will also support him, which will make the race very tight. I disagree with Márki-Zay on many issues, especially social and economic policy, but our goal is a return to a form of parliamentary democracy in which these kinds of issues can be discussed. If he wins, this will bring back "politics" to Hungary, in the sense that it will be about managing our common affairs and not inciting hatred. I think there will then be issues on which we can reach agreement. And it's my job to make sure that we find compromises that are as close as possible to Szikra's manifesto promises.



András Jámbor is a candidate in the 2022 Hungarian national elections, representing the left-wing Szikra movement. He is the founder and former editor-in-chief of news website Merce.hu and has organised numerous protests in Hungary.

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