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After Orbán: A New Dawn for Hungary?

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Hungary's opposition is convinced: this time there is a chance to beat the authoritarian Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party. But even if that happens, what alternative will the winner provide? A post-Orbán Hungary is likely to be better in many respects but a political transition still involves some risks. Konrad Bleyer-Simon looks at some of the main concerns and explains they may be overstated.

While Viktor Orbán's critics in Hungary would be glad to see him go, many also fear the possible chaos that may follow his departure from power. An ungovernable country, disastrous economic policy, deterioration of public infrastructure, further emigration, and a widening gap between the rich and the poor – these are some of the many commonly mentioned catastrophic scenarios.

There are two major sources of risks that need to be acknowledged when talking about the new Hungary. First, Orbán won't leave Hungarian politics after a defeat in April 2022. Second, the opposition is not made up of saints, angels, and highly experienced policy wonks. Very few of them have been involved in running government (or running anything other than a political campaign) before, and some of their members' commitment to democracy and the rule of law is highly dubious. Together, these factors could push disillusioned Hungarians to start a new life in another EU country, out of frustration that neither Orbán nor his challengers could really make a difference.

Let us look at the issue of the remnants of Orbánism first. While there might be people who hope that the current prime minister of Hungary will flee the country and never return, thereby paving the way for a harmonious, united Hungarian effort to rebuild a rule-of-law-abiding country, Orbán and his Fidesz party will still control close to half of the seats in parliament (not to mention the institutions staffed with loyalists) and will use every opportunity to disrupt the efforts of the new government. Zoltán Fleck, a law professor and advisor to the opposition, has explained these challenges and provided some recommendations on how to overcome them, but this will only be possible if the new government stays both united and committed to democracy and the rule of law.

The question of unity is where the second concern about the opposition comes in. As well as lacking significant governing experience, the members of the six-party opposition coalition could scarcely be more different from one another. Alongside two Green parties

(Párbeszéd and LMP – Politics Can Be Different) and the young liberals of Momentum, the coalition also includes two parties whose membership is associated with the pre-2010 corrupt governments (with some minor scandals in recent years as well) and the formerly far-right Jobbik whose members claim to have experienced character arcs in past years. During the primary campaign, photos of the Jobbik candidate Péter Barnabás Farkas giving a Heil Hitler salute in a former concentration camp made waves in the media. These stigmas are still felt, and the government's propaganda tries to make sure they are not forgotten. At the same time, key figures in the opposition claim that most of these problematic individuals have already been side-lined inside their parties. And indeed, there might be some truth to it. To save face, Jobbik asked Farkas to withdraw from the race, while the Socialists withdrew their support for Csaba Tóth, a party strongman known for his "mafia-style methods".

Would Orbán's fall mean a victory for conservatives?

Outside of Hungary, the opposition's supporters are overwhelmingly left-leaning and liberal. At a European level, it is the Greens and the Social Democrats who have been the most vocal in backing the coalition. Yet the face of an alternative Hungarian government would be a moderate conservative – someone whose political stance aligns with the European People's Party, which stood behind Viktor Orbán until relatively recently.

Selecting the conservative Péter Márki-Zay as the opposition's candidate for prime minister may well have been the most astute choice in the current political environment, however. There is a consensus among politicians and pollsters that Orbán and his party can rely on the support of almost half of the voting public. Some of these voters might embrace Fidesz's far-right racist agenda, others might benefit from its pro-middle-class economic policies or have become dependent on the goodwill of powerful Fidesz politicians. Therefore, we can expect a large part of Orbán's voters to stick with their party. In light of this, and taking into account Hotelling's competition model in game theory, which assumes that each citizen casts their vote according to their best interest, it is likely that some centre-leaning conservatives may be willing to back a candidate other than Orbán as long as the candidate's political position is fairly closely aligned with their own.

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Many opposition supporters would have preferred the green Mayor of Budapest Gergely Karácsony as the leading candidate. But in a race where the ultimate goal is to get rid of Orbán, Karácsony's voters will gladly vote for almost anyone who is less right-wing than Orbán, while some of the rather conservative Márki-Zay voters would be hesitant to vote for a candidate they regard as too left-wing. Aiming at both the "anyone but Orbán" camp and the moderate conservative voters is thus the surest recipe for an election victory, even if the choice of candidate appears to cement a political language very different from the kind that progressives would favour. Due to his often-controversial statements, Márki-Zay was even likened to Donald Trump by some opposition figures. He made allegations about the

homosexuality of prominent Fidesz politicians and the prime minister's son, alluded to a long-standing rumour about Orbán's frequent visits to mental hospitals abroad, while one of his campaign posters declared that Orbán had invited more migrants to the country than the far-right's liberal bogeyman George Soros.

According to Márki-Zay and his supporters, a deliberate strategy of fighting fire with fire is the best way to win an election against Orbán. If his campaign is built on homophobia or racism, let's turn them against him. Still, it is doubtful whether these kinds of messages can contribute to a positive image of the new government – especially at times when disinformation poses a significant threat to democratic public discourse.

It is difficult to say whether the rest of the opposition camp would be capable of providing a progressive narrative that would convince voters. Most of these parties, for example, already declared their support for Orbán's controversial border fences that were erected to keep out refugees from Middle Eastern countries. This is at least an indication that not even the progressive parts of the political camp are willing to counteract all the irrational fears and phobias whose seeds were planted by Orbán's xenophobic campaigns. We can only hope that being in power may lead them to re-evaluate their stances.

No strings attached

Another argument in favour of Márki-Zay's candidacy is that he may also be a better guarantor of a new start in Hungary. While Gergely Karácsony is more well liked in progressive and pro-democracy circles, his candidacy would also come with a caveat: his party has less than 2 per cent support and as such he had to team up with the Socialists in the past. The strategy seemed to be beneficial for both parties: the Green Párbeszéd gained access to positions (the Mayor of Budapest, for example) that would otherwise not be available for a party of that size, while the Socialists could use Karácsony to white-wash their corrupt image. However, in the long run this may continue to raise concerns: will Karácsony be strong enough to act against the party that helped him into power or will he be forced to turn a blind eye to corruption if it comes from the Socialists? Márki-Zay, on the other hand, does not owe anyone anything. He may not have a proper party, but as an independent candidate he already conquered Hódmezővásárhely, a former Fidesz-stronghold, in 2018 and won the primaries in 2021 – not through the exchange of favours but simply by following the rules set out by all participating parties. If the opposition manages to win, Márki-Zay will have the kind of legitimacy, as the person who beat Orbán, that will make him (almost) impossible to blackmail.

A leader who is not indebted to the strongmen (almost exclusively men) of the coalition parties can be a credible face and a strong leader of a movement that aims at rebuilding the key institutions that guarantee the rule of law, reiterating Hungary's commitment to the EU, and rooting out corruption across the board. Especially in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, Márki-Zay would bring a welcome change in attitude: while Orbán is still supportive of Putin and his regime (his media even referred to Zelenskyy as a murderous "dictator"), his challenger is vocal about the need to decrease dependence of Russian energy and actively support Ukraine, which shares a border with Hungary. The transactional foreign policies of Fidesz would be countered by moral imperatives – something that has been missing from Hungarian politics for quite some time. There are some indications that the candidate himself is trying to improve, learn from his mistakes and free himself from

the burden of his (relatively recent) controversial statements. He presents his clumsiness as a sign that he has, in contrast to Orbán, not yet immersed himself in schematised propaganda messages but rather is trying to actively make sense of reality and then convey his messages accordingly, albeit sometimes too hastily.

Is change really on the horizon?

The question remains as to whether the opposition will gain the opportunity to form a government. In 2018, there was much enthusiasm about their chance to break Orbán's two-thirds majority in parliament, but in the end, the unexpectedly high turnout at the election led to the continuation of the status quo. The following year, the opposition seemed to have learned from its past mistakes, joining forces at the municipal elections to win in the urban areas of Hungary.

Now, the question is whether the lucky streak can continue. Some polls in late 2021 showed Orbán and the opposition enjoying almost equal support, but in recent months the governing party seems to have crept 3 to 4 percentage points ahead of the opposition. Still, it is still not impossible to turn the situation around: there are many undecided voters who can be mobilised, many of them young, pro-European and demanding change after 12 years. The fact that Orbán aligns himself with the Russian leader who is orchestrating a genocide in a neighbouring country might open the eyes of many inactive voters: Orbán's cynical politics might indeed have catastrophic consequences, and thus it is time to put an end to it. Even if the new face of Hungary is a conservative one, new leadership could bring the country to the kind of normalcy that has not been seen for many years and pave the way for future progress.

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