

To Change Politics in Hungary, We Need to Find the Switch

Article by Gergely Karácsony, Zoltán Lakner

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The April 2022 Hungarian election resulted in a resounding victory for Viktor Orbán's right-wing populist Fidesz party, despite the high hopes about the chances of a broad coalition of opposition parties. In this interview, the mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony speaks about the financial challenges the Hungarian capital is facing as a result of Orbán's budgetary policies, and explains why he believes that the next few years may prove decisive for the political future of both the country and its capital city.

Zoltán Lakner: After gaining another two-thirds majority at the last national elections¹, Fidesz continues to dominate Hungarian politics. How will this result shape the coming period?

Gergely Karácsony: Although I have a hunch, I still do not completely understand what led to the opposition's weak election performance in April. Many elements of the opposition strategy that I regarded as necessary were implemented. At the same time, it became clear that cooperation among the parties, and involving citizens in this cooperation by setting up primaries, were necessary but not sufficient conditions for success. Despite my efforts, we did not manage to come up with a strong pro-equality programme. I am using this word instead of "left-wing" on purpose – although I am fully aware that this is left-wing politics, and I am proud to be a left-wing politician. I believe that we should not think in ideological categories, but instead try to relate to the lived reality of citizens.

Today, my main task is to win the election for mayor in 2024, even though the government's decision to combine [European and municipal] elections on the same day might make this very tricky.² While it pains me to say it, I cannot imagine that the European elections will take place with no in-fighting within the opposition. A major challenge for the opposition is that we struggle to imagine what governing together would look like. Even if this cooperation is far from impossible: running Budapest in a multi-party coalition for over three years proves that the opposition can indeed govern together. I am not sure if this track record is enough to win the national elections, but as supporters of the opposition we need to keep our fingers crossed.

What exactly would it mean for the opposition to win? Would they simply use the opportunities provided by the current political framework, or can they significantly challenge Orbán's system?

It is crucial to defend our 2019 achievement [when the opposition gained control over some key municipalities]. Elections inevitably mobilise people who are critical of the system. Those who voted for us in 2019 wanted to see the end of Orbán's regime, and I would argue that many of them believe that our success at the next municipal elections is a step towards pulling down the system.

At the same time, I think Budapest has significantly changed under our governance, and we must defend what we have achieved since 2019. The fact that cars can no longer use the city's Chain Bridge following its renovation has become a new normal. For decades, experts called for such an action, but nobody dared to take this step.

We have received a mandate to make changes and transform city politics. Our resources are scarce, so we cannot make huge changes. Still, whatever we do, it fits into a clear vision. In my view, many people already see that we are introducing a different kind of politics. Good governance on the local level might not be enough to topple Orbán's government on the national level, but I am sure that every system reaches an end eventually.

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What contributes to the weakening of the system?

Economic performance is one reason for the success of the Orbán government over the past decade. The Hungarian population had probably never experienced such huge growth in real wages as that seen in recent years. This was made possible with the help of EU funding. Now, however, there is no economic boom, and the government may lose EU funds. This is a completely different situation, and it remains to be seen whether the government can survive by its communication [campaigns] alone.

Do you think there is a risk that there won't be an election for the position of the mayor of Budapest in the future (as it was rumoured that direct mayoral elections might be abolished before 2024)?

For the citizens of Budapest, participating in local elections and electing the city's mayor is a meaningful democratic exercise. This experience has not been taken away from them so far, precisely because such a measure would be highly unpopular. Not to mention that the members of the governing party probably think it doesn't matter if they lose Budapest, as long as they win on the national level. And there they are still strong. In the current climate of polarisation, right-wing populist forces, such as the governing party, turn out to be popular among voters from marginalised groups, smaller towns, and among the elderly and less educated. This is difficult to digest as a left-wing person, similarly to the fact that during past elections in the capital city, I (as the progressive candidate) gained less support in some of those districts where traditionally a left-wing politician would be expected to be popular. By now, upper middle-class citizens have become the most important electorate for the opposition. This is a huge challenge for pro-equality politics.

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How will the next opposition candidate for mayor be selected?

At this time, I do not support organising primaries. In a diverse opposition, the primaries could open debates which we try to settle internally as a coalition. I can also see that the unity of the opposition no longer exists, however this does not mean that another opposition will not emerge – hopefully a better, more powerful one.

Voters rightfully expect a joint electoral candidacy. A cooperation on behalf of the opposition will be

necessary in some form. In 2024, any party which undermines the unity of the opposition in the municipality campaign because of a chip on their shoulder will be punished severely by the voters at the European elections.

How can the city make ends meet?

2022 is the first year we do not have a surplus. Last year we still had a 20 billion surplus. We start the new year with a deficit of over 10 billion forints. And then we will get the new electricity bills. Increasing energy prices have already caused problems for the public transportation company. Next year, street lighting, drinking water supply, and public transportation together will generate astronomical utility bills. However, we are not sitting idle; we are trying to find ways to minimise the impacts of the energy price hike.

There is a switch somewhere we cannot find, and we may have the opportunity to influence people to pursue a more equal world not only for themselves, but for others as well.

Will there be EU funds available for the capital?

There will be some for sure. We have no idea how much. Along with two other Hungarian cities Pécs and Miskolc, Budapest is part of the EU initiative called “100 climate neutral cities”. Even if we cannot become fully climate neutral by 2030, these cities have taken huge steps in this direction. I believe that being part of such initiatives can create the kind of political legitimacy that allows us to use domestic funds in higher proportions as well.

The government plans to draw from the recovery funds and spend it on breaking Hungary’s energy dependence on Russia. This is very positive and should have been started much earlier. This cannot be done without Budapest – the city, its companies and citizens. In addition, when we produce remote heating by geothermic energy, we save money for the central budget, as the government can spend less on gas price compensation. So, in the end, this is in the interest of the government as well.

Whether or not we receive these funds will depend on the agreement between the government and the European Commission. We have a large stake in the operational programmes that are affected by the EU’s freezing of funds to Hungary (due to the rule of law situation and corruption issues). In this respect, we keep our fingers crossed that these funds will become available. I am far from being a friend of this government, however Budapest has an interest in the disbursement of the fund, especially since it would help break the city’s energy dependence.

You have mentioned that egalitarian policies are much needed in the country, and it seems like climate consciousness is also growing among citizens. Nevertheless, left-wing and green parties are barely able to secure the 5 per cent support needed to cross the parliamentary threshold. Why?

This is a very important question. And I can even raise the stakes. How could a government that self-identifies as Christian be so popular in the most secular country in Europe? In my view, these are questions asked in a left-wing paradigm. They presuppose that politics is about correct solutions,

choices between good and bad, and that politics as well as vote behaviour are rational. Meanwhile, the kind of politics that is extremely successful today in Hungary does not consider whether a particular measure is good or bad for the many; it only cares whether it serves the interests of the powerful few.

Many people in society believe that equality doesn't exist for them – they feel like equality is something they are left out of. Yet, they are not demanding solidarity from their institutions. What is more, a significant proportion of those citizens who feel left behind see Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party as a pro-equality political power. So, I don't think we can, at this point, anticipate voter behaviour or draw too many conclusions from opinion polls. There is a switch somewhere we cannot find, and we may have the opportunity to influence people to pursue a more equal world not only for themselves, but for others as well. The openness to this is certainly present in the thinking of society, however, so far, we have not been able to exploit it.

This is an abridged version of an interview first published in the Hungarian weekly [Jelen](#).

[1] As the 2024 municipal election is expected to be held on the same day as the European election, the "other ballot" can also refer to the European election where parties have to be chosen vs. the municipal election where the voter picks a candidate.

[2] In Hungary, general elections are conducted in a two-ballot system: on the first ballot citizens can vote for a candidate, on the second one for a party. In this context, the first ballot is to elect 106 members of parliament from single-member districts, the second ballot assigns 93 seats based on party preferences.



Gergely Karácsony is the mayor of Budapest since 2019, representing the progressive-green Dialogue for Hungary party (PM). He previously served as member of the National Assembly from 2010 to 2014 and as mayor of the 14th district of Budapest from 2014 to 2019.



Zoltán Lakner studied political science and social policy and works as a political analyst and adviser. He is a regular contributor for weekly and daily newspapers. He is also a lecturer at the Eötvös Loránd University and the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest and author of several books about the contemporary politics of Hungary. He is the deputy editor-in-chief of *168 Óra* political weekly.

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