

Hungary's Opposition in the Grip of "Fidesz Light"

Article by Konrad Bleyer-Simon

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European and municipal elections used to be an opportunity for parties opposing Orbán to score political victories. But the emergence of popular leaders from the Right is leading to fragmentation in Hungary's democratic front, further weakening progressive values.

Since Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party got into power in 2010, the electoral system in Hungary has been redrawn in a way that makes it extremely hard for challengers to emerge – at least at the national level. Until recently, municipal and European elections offered opportunities to liberal, social-democratic, and green candidates. In 2014, two of Hungary's 21 European Parliament seats went to the Greens, and the capital Budapest has been run by Green mayor Gergely Karácsony since 2019. On 9 June, however, when the country will hold both European and municipal elections, the established opposition parties risk losing support.

A bumpy ride

Karácsony is a member and former co-leader of the Green party *Párbeszéd* (Dialogue), which now officially runs as the partner of the Socialists (MSZP) and former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's left-liberal Democratic Coalition (DK). These parties have been part of a united anti-Orbán front in the last national election.

The 2019 municipal vote is one of the few recent success stories of the Hungarian opposition. Even if Fidesz won an overwhelming majority of municipalities, the opposition front conquered some of the most important cities, including Budapest and many of its districts. It was a small victory, but it gave democratic forces in the country an opportunity to regroup and act as a counterbalance to Orbán's illiberal politics. It also allowed them to gain visibility and government experience that could be used to challenge Fidesz at later elections – even at the national level.

Karácsony's Budapest was among the founders of the Pact of Free Cities, which started in 2019 as a cooperation between the progressive-run capitals of the "Visegrad Four" countries (Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava, and Budapest) and soon turned into a global network to exchange best practices on urban development, climate change mitigation, and standing up to populists at the local and national level. The mayors also made plans to get EU funds directly to the cities, knowing that national governments would limit their access to the national budget. In May this year, Budapest secured 770 million euros in EU development funding.

However, as his first mayoral term comes to an end, Karácsony has few big successes to celebrate. Despite having a team of respected public policy experts around him, he failed to keep many of his campaign promises, such as the introduction of a property tax on the super-rich, the extension of the city's tram network, and the creation of a unified healthcare system for Budapest. Moreover, he did not manage to strengthen the position of the opposition parties or to mitigate the impact of the government's xenophobic and homophobic narratives and policies.

This is not just Karácsony's fault. The Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis that followed were unforeseen challenges that the mayor and his team had to deal with. Instead of providing support, the government decided to limit municipalities' revenue sources while increasing their required contribution to the central budget. In addition, Budapest and other cities received less EU funding as a consequence of the Hungarian government's disregard for the rule of law.

Even under these difficult circumstances, the city's Green administration made significant investments in improving healthcare services, it started renovating the public housing stock, provided utility bill support to poorer households during the energy crisis in 2022, and restored some of Budapest's landmarks.

Many voters seem willing to put their trust in Karácsony for another five years. But while he has the greatest chance to win the election, the share of his allies in the general assembly is likely to decrease, and the chances that he will be able to form a majority are minimal. To win a second term, Karácsony's alliance will probably need to expand, including political forces that have so far been quite critical of the mayor's actions. Already in the current term, news media reported significant infighting within the alliance.

The other Greens

The greatest challenge for Karácsony in the municipal elections comes from Hungary's other Green party, LMP, which decided to back a different candidate for mayor: Dávid Vitézy, a public transport expert who also served as ministerial commissioner in the Orbán government.

The two Green parties have a history of rivalry. Karácsony's Párbeszéd was established in 2013 by former LMP members who left the party due to internal disagreements. Today, LMP is still Hungary's only full member of the European Green Party (EGP), while Párbeszéd received the status of associate member in June 2023. However, the EGP expressed support for Karácsony's reelection, deemed essential in the fight against Orbán's anti-European populism, and suspended its political cooperation with LMP during the EU election campaign.

Vitézy's candidacy is considered by many observers an Orbán-approved strategy. It is not the first time that opposition candidates with no chance of winning enter the electoral race. However, compared to figures who ran for elections in the past years, such as a reality TV star and an adult camming entrepreneur, Vitézy is a credible candidate with vast knowledge and experience in urban governance. He is expected to gain more than 20 per cent of the vote, while Karácsony polls at around 46 per cent, and Fidesz's Alexandra Szentkirályi at 19.

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If Vitézy's candidacy is indeed a Fidesz-orchestrated move, and if the extreme-right (but Fidesz-aligned) Our Homeland Movement makes it into the general assembly, Orbán and his cronies will have significant power to block or water down important legislation in the capital. These are two "ifs", but neither is far-fetched.

Reformed Orbán ally

In the long run, the biggest problem for the established opposition parties is not Vitézy but Péter Magyar, a newly emerged politician whose charisma seems to appeal to a large part of the country's electorate – mainly former voters of progressive forces, and only to a lesser extent previous Fidesz supporters.

Until a few months ago, Magyar was only known to the wider public as the ex-husband of former Minister of Justice Judit Varga. He was one of the yuppies whose connections to the governing party earned them well-paid positions in state-owned enterprises. However, at the beginning of the year, independent news media outlet *444.hu* revealed that a person involved in a child abuse case had been granted a presidential pardon. A scandal ensued: President Katalin Novák resigned, and Varga, whose ministry had approved the pardon, announced that she was retiring from politics. She was previously expected to lead Fidesz's list for the European elections.

In the middle of this political crisis, Magyar entered the scene. He gained popularity through Facebook posts, interviews given to popular independent outlets, and later with the publication of a recording, in which Varga, then still a minister, explained to him how Fidesz's cronies interfered in the work of the public prosecutor's office.

Magyar built his support by criticising corruption and the smear campaigns of the governing party. His policy positions include increased investment in healthcare and education, and environmental objectives such as nature conservation. Yet on some key issues, Magyar doesn't seem to share the values of progressives. For example, he declared he saw no problem in the use of the Pegasus spyware against journalists, spoke out against stronger European integration, and avoids talking about the rights of refugees, national minorities, or the LGBTQIA+ community. He also referred to Momentum, an opposition force, as "a party conceived in sin" because of its opposition to Budapest's Olympics bid, sponsored by Fidesz.

Despite Magyar's ambiguity, his anti-government protests mobilised tens of thousands of people, and his newly founded Tisza party is expected to come second after Fidesz in the European elections. In Budapest, Tisza did not present a mayoral candidate who could challenge Karácsony, but it has its own candidates for some of the capital's districts. The party might gain five seats in the municipal assembly.

Race to the bottom

Many of the new formations that emerged in the last 10 years of Hungarian politics were led by former Orbán voters or supporters. In 2017, Momentum surfaced as the voice of young liberals, speaking mainly for university-educated Hungarians living abroad. Its founder, András Fekete-Győr, had previously worked as an assistant to a conservative MP in Germany, and said in interviews that he had voted for Fidesz in the past.

In 2022 Péter Márki-Zay, leader of The Everybody's Hungary People's Party, ran as the united opposition's candidate for prime minister. He too mentioned voting for Fidesz in the past. Márki-Zay was considered a viable candidate against Orbán because of his conservative profile, which made him appealing to disillusioned Fidesz voters. The strategy did not work: Orbán won two-thirds of the seats in parliament, and the united opposition fell apart. Worse, the assumption that progressive voters would support anyone who is even minimally to the left of Orbán has contributed to gradually eliminating progressive causes from the opposition's agenda.

This time, with the emergence of Magyar, the united opposition is even weaker. In April, according to polls conducted by Median, Tisza had 25 per cent support among those who were sure to vote in the European Parliament elections. Fidesz had 45 per cent in the same poll. The other three parties that had a chance to elect the MEPs were the united opposition of DK-MSZP-Párbeszéd with nine per cent, the parody formation Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP) with six, and Momentum with five per cent. Based on these numbers, the established opposition is unlikely to get more than four seats in the European Parliament, with recent forecasts suggesting it could win as few as two.

There is also a risk that those who do get a seat are not the most European-minded candidates. Miklós Haraszti, a key figure in the opposition to the communist regime, noted that most party lists for the European elections are led by candidates with a domestic agenda. Meanwhile, Tisza's candidates for the European Parliament have no political experience whatsoever. As a result, the election campaign barely features any European topics, apart from promises to get frozen European funds and accusations of warmongering in relation to Europe's support for Ukraine.

“Fidesz light”

While progressives are likely to retain a presence in Hungarian municipalities and the European Parliament, the prominence of forces that come from former governing circles – “Fidesz light”, as they are often dubbed – is extremely worrying. Even if Vitézy and Magyar's intention to put an end to corruption and improve public services is genuine, they are clearly not keen on putting progressive issues on the agenda. Meanwhile, their presence also weakens the left-wing or progressive elements of the opposition, making it unable to challenge the government's illiberal tendencies. This is problematic in light of the smear campaigns, propaganda, and extreme bigotry dominating the country's public discourse.

Orbán's Hungary has made itself a name as the illiberal safe haven of the European Union, where a holocaust-denying former Iranian president can give a guest lecture at a public university, a former prime minister of an EU-candidate country can get asylum to escape a prison sentence for corruption, and whose Prime Minister poses with Vladimir Putin despite Russia's well-documented human rights violations in Ukraine.

After the European elections, Hungary will take over the rotating EU presidency. With right-wing forces expected to gain ground across the continent, there is an even greater risk that Orbán will use this opportunity to weaken European unity at a time when a stronger Europe would be badly needed.



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