



## Hungary's Sudden Political Reshuffle Broke Orbán's Power Monopoly

*By Daniel Hegedüs*

Local elections rarely enjoy much international attention. However, the unexpected success of Hungary's united opposition at the recent municipal polls has created a new political reality in the country. It broke the 13-years-long streak of electoral success of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party. Orbán now faces an opposition that has gained fresh legitimacy, that is on the rise rather than in disarray, and that is eager to challenge him.

The elections were a breakthrough for the opposition. It conquered not only the capital, Budapest, where it won the symbolic position of lord mayor and an absolute majority in the municipal assembly, but also 10 out of the 23 largest cities. For the first time since 2010, the opposition parties find themselves empowered to challenge Orbán's political hegemony and his claim of being the only true representative of the Hungarian people.

A strategy of full cooperation was key to the opposition's success. In most cities, the six parties—covering the political spectrum from the left through the greens and liberals to the radical-right Jobbik—united behind a single candidate to challenge Fidesz. Isolated cases of scandals and open conflict aside, they showed for the first time they are able to unite and fight for a common goal instead of fighting among themselves. Demand for this from the electorate was the key driver behind the cooperation strategy and it rewarded the opposition for it.

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The foundations of Orbán's power are not shaken, however. Based on polling data, every second voter with stable party preferences still supports Fidesz. Against this backdrop, the fall in support for the party among voters without stable party preferences caused by the sex, drugs, and corruption scandal surrounding the Fidesz mayor of Győr was also a factor in the opposition's breakthrough. The scandal demobilized weakly committed Fidesz voters and mobilized opposition supporters. This was essential, bearing in mind that the diaspora across Europe, which is mostly critical of the government, could not vote in these elections.



But one thing has changed fundamentally. For nine years Orbán and Fidesz have been the only credible political force in Hungary. Now the spell of the prime minister's monopoly on power is broken, even if the position of his government remains stable. Competitive politics has returned to Hungary, challenging the homogeneity of the political space that has been carefully created by Orbán since 2010.

## A Broken Spell, but Still Not a Democracy

In spite of the opposition's breakthrough, it would be wrong to now consider Hungary a democracy again. The country still has a competitive authoritarian regime in which not only have the checks and balances of liberal constitutionalism been demolished and the plurality of the media undermined, but elections are also flawed. According to the OSCE, the 2014 and 2018 parliamentary elections did not fully meet the standards of democratic elections. The irregularities experienced during the recent municipal elections surpassed by far those in previous contests. Vote buying, organized transportation of voters from Ukraine, or physical violence against opposition politicians and journalists, like in the city of Pécs, have been widely documented. These irregularities further emphasize the regime's authoritarian qualities. Democracy is characterized by an even political playing field, not by the mere possibility of opposition victory.

## Instead of immediate confrontation, Orbán has apparently opted for an exhaustion strategy

Hungary will next hold parliamentary elections in 2022, which leaves plenty of time for both political camps to gain in strength or to decline. The wide vote for the opposition in urban areas has led to a sudden change in the government's strategy. Orbán has signaled his readiness to cooperate with the new, opposition-led municipal authorities, instead of punishing them by financial means as he said he would during the campaign. Controlling large municipalities can provide important resources for the opposition, financially or through access to local media. However, municipal competences and finances have been significantly cut in recent years. Even Budapest and other large cities could be ruined if the government further withholds funding.

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But, instead of immediate confrontation, Orbán has apparently opted for an exhaustion strategy. His goal is to ease the pressure on the government and the protest potential in a threatening political situation, to undermine the opposition's unity, and to settle the status of Fidesz within the European People's Party (EPP). He will not want to endanger the latter by authoritarian moves, before he strikes at the opposition by legislative and financial means.

## The Challenge for the Opposition—and for the EU

Maintaining political momentum and unity are the opposition's two key challenges. As the electoral support for the liberal party Momentum and the left-liberal Democratic Coalition party of former prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány appears to be much stronger than that of the other parties, the opposition may undergo further consolidation in the next years. This could be a blessing and a curse, resulting either in a less fragmented opposition or the end of coordination due to conflicts. The opposition parties would be well advised to

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maintain their unity and to invest heavily in local policy work and reinforcing their organizational structures. They have three years to demonstrate their fitness to govern. Doing the above is a necessary precondition for an opposition victory in 2022. But whether they are enough in a competitive authoritarian regime that strongly favors the incumbents remains open.

Like the country's citizens, in the last years Hungary's international partners adjusted to the political reality of unchallenged power created by Orbán. Now, as the spell of his power monopoly is broken, it is up to them—and in particular the European Union—whether new authoritarian moves that further constrain municipalities, undermine unions, and curtail judicial independence and civil society are used to weaken the unified democratic opposition. Leaving the status of Fidesz in the EPP in limbo and keeping the Article 7 procedure against Hungary alive provide leverage over Orbán's regime and thus prevent further autocratization. Abandoning these tools prematurely—for example, by restoring the membership of Fidesz at the EPP congress in November—would be a huge mistake.

The rest of the European Union failed to counter the authoritarian developments in Hungary in the last years—it should now do everything possible not to undermine the chance for a democratic future for the country that the recent municipal elections have thrown up.

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