

Local elections in Hungary: opposition wins in big cities

Franciszek Tyszka

Even though Fidesz won the local elections in Hungary on 13 October on the national scale, the outcome may be viewed as a success for the opposition. István Tarlós, who had served as the mayor of Budapest since 2010 and who was supported by Orbán's party, was beaten by the joint candidate of the opposition parties, Gergely Karácsony (51% to 44%). The opposition candidates also won in 14 out of 23 districts in Budapest and will have a majority in the city council (18 out of 33 seats). Mayors representing the opposition will also govern 10 out of the 23 cities with county rights (also known as provinces), including four of the country's five largest cities: Budapest, Szeged, Miskolc and Pécs (Debrecen will remain in Fidesz's hands). The opposition also took power in most (12 of 23) of the councils in these cities. In turn, Fidesz achieved a total victory in county councils – it has a majority in all 18. The turnout was around 50% (44% in 2014).

Commentary

- The opposition achieved such good results because it had formed a broad election front – from socialists and liberals through greens to nationalists – which had joint lists in most of the large cities. The conflicted and fragmented opposition usually lost to Fidesz. In the recent election, the opposition groupings also suffered defeat in locations where they did not manage to form a united front. The outcome of the snap mayoral election in Hódmezővásárhely in February 2018 already proved that an extensive alliance of all opposition groupings is capable of beating Fidesz even in places believed to be its bastions. The opposition also owes its success to its relatively consistent election campaign, during which the need to get citizens engaged in co-deciding on local issues was emphasised and a strong focus was placed on social issues (e.g. the housing crisis) and ecology. This contrasted with the campaign launched by Fidesz politicians which was lacking in energy and coordination. The opposition candidates had limited access to the public media but they were engaged in an active and successful campaign on the Internet. 'Either new stadiums or improving healthcare' turned out to be a catchy slogan in the capital as it referred to Fidesz's promises to allocate hundreds of billions of forints to investments in Budapest.
- Fidesz's poor result was also an effect of the corruption scandal which the mayor of Győr, Zsolt Borkai, was involved in and which broke out ten days ahead of the election. The scandal and the government's delayed and chaotic response, which saw them play down the problem, laid bare the numerous shortcomings of Fidesz's long-term rule:

corruption links, nepotism and double standards when it comes to morals. Although Borkai, who governs a city which has now been a Fidesz bastion for a few terms, finally beat the opposition candidate (winning only half a point more), the scandal in which he was involved helped the opposition in its campaign in other cities.

- After the results were announced, Orbán and Karácsony declared they were willing to co-operate. However, it may be expected that there will be a scenario of confrontation in Fidesz's relations with local government members representing the opposition. Already during its election campaign, Fidesz threatened that insubordinate local governments would have restricted access to EU funds and that their competences would be further reduced. The opposition will likely appeal for support to Brussels as it did already during the campaign. It has also promised to bring the previous government to account over corruption. The tension between the central and the local governments is most likely to occur in Budapest which is heavily indebted. The city is no longer able to implement investments from its own funds, and its authorities are financially dependent on the central government. This gave rise to tensions even when the city mayor was a member of Fidesz.
- The parliamentary election will be held in three years' time. The collective success in Budapest may strongly encourage the broad opposition front to continue co-operation, but this will be extremely difficult, considering the differences between the groupings which form it. The election results also revealed the limitations of Fidesz's electoral base and highlighted the historically and socially entrenched preferences of voters in big cities (Budapest back above all liberals, Szeged socialists, and Miskolc opposition protest groupings). They have also made it clear to Orbán that Fidesz is unable to permanently take control of the big cities (with the exception of Debrecen). Sticking to a confrontational approach to local authorities independent of Fidesz would encourage the opposition to integrate. For this reason, Orbán may adopt a more diversified policy towards individual local governments in the longer run.