In Hungary, similarly to other countries, the most attention during municipal elections goes to the elections of the capital city, particularly to the election of the Mayor. Budapest is the most populous and most important economic center of the country, where currently 17% of the Hungarian population lives. The capital’s GDP is many times higher than in any other region of the country: 39.8% of the GDP was generated here in 2012, whereas in the second most advanced region, the Western Transdanubian, this rate was only 9.4%. Unsurprisingly, the center-left opposition of the Orbán-government chose its mayoral candidate after careful consideration, as owing to its political and economic importance, Budapest is considered to be the most important city of the country.

Although seven candidates take part in the mayoral elections, realistically there are two potential winners in the race: besides István Tarlós, the candidate of Fidesz-KDNP (Fidesz – Christian Democratic People’s Party) only Ferenc Falus, the joint candidate of MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party), DK (Democratic Coalition) and Együtt2014 (Together2014) has a chance of winning the elections.

The voters of the capital want the personality of the Mayor to have three main components at the same time: familiarity with the city, leading experience and independence. Independence means that the metropolitans think of the Mayor as the city’s lobbyist in the government. This task can be contradictory to the interests of the parties and organizations standing behind the Mayor, thus according to the logic of empowerment through direct election, the defeat of political loyalty is unavoidable when it conflicts with independence.

Tarlós’s support does not come primarily from Fidesz, rather from the fact that although he is committed towards the right wing government, he always strove to keep the value of independence, and he did not hesitate to take on conflicts with the
government when dealing with crucial political issues in connection to the capital (for instance: in the case of financial support of the European Union regarding major investment projects in Budapest). In American politics, “maverick” is the name given to a public figure who finds independence a core value, and who is willing to face conflicts with its own group if dealing with value-based topics. The Mayor of London Ken Livingstone and his successor, Boris Johnson were politicians like this. The leaders of the parties do not like this type, especially in a party with guiding principles like Fidesz. Tarlós can be a “maverick” because he avoided joining the party. However, this position can be considered a double-edged sword, as he is an “outsider” not only for the opposition, but for the governing party as well. This opinion is supported by the serious argument that took place between Tarlós and János Lázár, the Secretary of State of the Prime Minister's Office about the financial support of €34 million of the European Union.

Ferenc Falus started his campaign with good chances: as former Chief Medical Officer, he had leadership experience, and he could be considered an independent personality. He was sympathetic to the opposition since the beginning, seeing that in 2012 he took part in the creation of the Haza és Haladás Foundation led by former prime minister Gordon Bajnai. His problem is that as a civil servant he was relatively unknown to the general public, and so he was inevitably pushed behind the parties who nominated him and their well-known politicians (most notably by Ferenc Gyurcsány). At times it seems as if though MSZP and DK don’t even have a candidate. Despite meeting the independence requirements, Falus has been unable to take advantage of it so far. Gyurcsány can still “steal the show” on his own: one of his essays received more media coverage than Falus’s whole election program. Gyurcsány is the backbone of the opposition, even though Falus should play that role in the capital.

Even his video for the ice bucket challenge did not help Falus’s reputation. Theoretically, given Falus’s professional and personal background, it could have been a good campaign tool: it was a nice gesture that he wanted to draw attention to
the cure of a disease called ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). One can say that, as a former health care worker, it was almost his duty to do so. However, the implementation backfired. Falus did not consult with anyone, and this drew attention to a character trait which could be risky for the parties who nominated him: he is too obstinate to do so. Furthermore, the home-made quality of the video and the parties’s condemnatory responses exposed that he has no campaign staff. Ultimately, this creative gesture probably brought him more harm than good.

Whoever wins the election, the new mayor will not have an easy task. The Fidesz-KDNP government’s rural development program anticipates a conflict of interest, as has already been indicated by the Tarlós-Lázár debate. Therefore, we can expect further struggles between capital and government in the near future.