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Hungary Divided

What is to be learned from the municipal elections?

The municipal elections of Hungary have become exactly the game changing moment that the opposition had been waiting for. Overturning the previous Fidesz majority in the capital with 14 opposition districts out of 23 (2 independent districts included) was more than the cooperating opposition parties could hope for. The fact that Budapest had elected Gergely Karácsony as mayor of Budapest and several large cities could also be won back from the governing party sheds light to a great divide in Hungary, one that the opposition must keep in mind if it wants to continue its current success story.

While it is true that through strategic cooperation the opposition could finally make a breakthrough in the cities, on the county level Fidesz won the majority of the country. Though the avalanche of the prominent sex/corruption scandal of the mayor of Győr cost the two term mayor of Budapest, István Tarlós his position, Fidesz kept its majority in the countryside. The governing party would still win in a national election. More than ever the nation is split in two and Fidesz still knows how to woo rural Hungary better.

The opposition could make its gains because it understood that in order to succeed the many fragmented parties needed to cooperate and show strength and leadership. Even two years ago this would have seemed radical. Authority was confused with authoritarianism. They are learning

though that presenting one candidate instead of several competing ones is rewarded by voters looking for a viable alternative to Fidesz. In this sense the opposition has learned from its previous mistakes, but also from its opponent who has always taken great care to not make internal party debates public and show a unified front.

Strategic cooperation is important, but it would have been all for nothing if the opposition hadn't been able to provide more of a political program than just saying that they will overthrow Viktor Orbán. This greatly contributed to voters seeing them as potent actors. The success of DK and Momentum in the EP elections gave a much needed boost of morale to opposition voters and activists as well. This optimism was carried on well to the municipal elections. What can also be seen though is that while infrastructure isn't everything, it does matter a lot. The current gains of the opposition show the limits of their network and organization.

Having done so well in the elections, the opposition can no longer claim that Hungary is an autocracy. The claims that voters are lacking information about politics due to the government dominating public media have been proved wrong. While we can see that this is indeed a strong influence, the municipal elections have also proved that being present locally, building networks and infrastructure, recruiting volunteers and using new forms of technology to communicate with voters can be effective in bypassing government messaging. This however is also a learning process and a process of growth which takes time and perseverance.

The greatest mistake the opposition can make at the moment is if it overestimates its victory and thinks it is now ready to take over power from Viktor Orbán. This is not the case. The opposition can win in national

elections if it rebuilds the rural networks and infrastructure the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) used to have and continues to put in the political work required to win. Fidesz will assess the situation and recover from this loss. It will have a new internal enemy, which is beneficial for it in terms of political communication. Thus, the opposition has to actively try and understand the “other” Hungary in order for it to succeed and figure out what motivates them to seek change. If they can find the key to the countryside Hungarian politics will enter a new era.