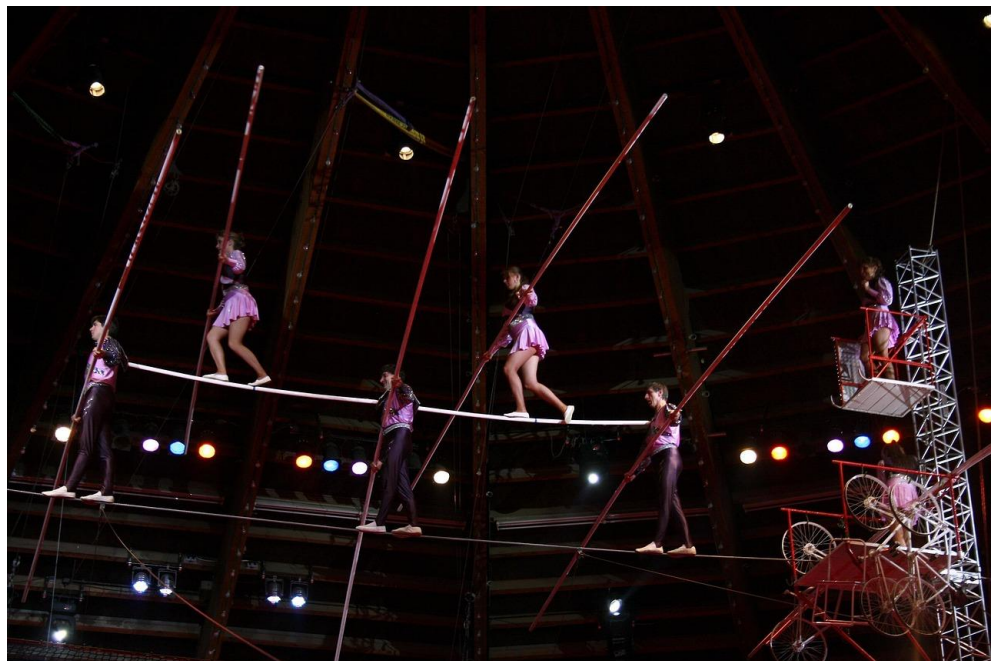


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## The return of the forgotten political middle



One of Fidesz's strategic advantages in the past 15 years of the Orbán regime has been to persuade and retain the political middle, the so-called *à-la-carte* voters. They are the ones without whom neither Fidesz nor the emerging TISZA Party is likely to win. But let us not think that this is something unique to Hungary: the democracies of the world are full of *à-la-carte* voters.

Who are the *à-la-carte voters*? This is the group that votes in an election for the party that offers the best and most affordable “menu”. We are talking about a diverse group of people with malleable ideological, political preferences, sympathizing with several parties. Indeed, they may even be very superficial followers of politics who leave their decisions to the last minute. Securing their own well-being comes first, so they tend to vote for the political force that offers them the best deal of all. Without this group, the Socialists (MSZP) could not have won re-election in 2006, nor Fidesz in 2014, 2018 and 2022. The size and orientation of this electorate is difficult to determine, but it is probably between 20 and 30 percent, and more right-wing on the political scale.

The importance of winning the political centre was most recently demonstrated in the 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections. Many people thought that the Russian-Ukrainian war and debates about Slovakia's Euro-Atlantic orientation would decide the election. Among others, almost all right-wing and liberal parties in Slovakia thought so. However, several polls before the campaign period showed that respondents saw continuous disputes, chaos and instability caused by the Matovič and Heger governments as one of the greatest problems. Robert Fico (SMER) and Peter Pellegrini (Hlas), who were in opposition for a few years, seemed to have realized this

when they built their campaign on the promise of a government based on security and stability, and ended up winning. More specifically, Pellegrini managed to convince the majority of à-la-carte voters to vote for him (estimated at between 30 and 40 percent of the eligible electorate).

What is the situation in Hungary now? The rapid rise of the TISZA Party in the 2024 EP elections, in addition to winning the votes of the opposition side, most likely played a role in convincing a small part of the à-la-carte electorate. And this trend seems to be strengthening. It is not an accident that the 21 points of the TISZA Party's platform contain several promises affecting the living standards and livelihoods of different social groups. In addition, the party leader Peter Magyar is clearly working to undermine the left-right or national-liberal sectarian ideological logic of the past. This is based on his motto '*there is no left or right, only Hungarian*', and in practice it manifests itself in distancing TISZA from the debate on the Russian-Ukrainian war, or more recently in the abstention from demonstrations concerning the banning of the Budapest PRIDE march.

The role of the Hungarian political centre is becoming more important as a result of the intensifying party competition. What we can see at the moment is that both Fidesz and TISZA are trying to make a more tangible offer to this group,



mainly along the line of welfare issues. It seems that a lot will depend on the framing of the story: while Fidesz campaigns with an international outlook, TISZA campaigns with a domestic focus. As the Slovakian example outlined above has shown, the party that best captures the thinking of the à-la-carte voters will win the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary elections.