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Vision and Passion in Hungarian Politics – Conference Summary

What do voters look for in a political leader today? Can it be different in various democratic countries? How is the political landscape in Hungary before the approaching parliamentary election? Year-end CFPA conference summary.



Centre for Fair Political Analysis held a conference on political leadership and political leaders. Here is our summary of the event held on December 16.

Our institute publishes a magazine, which reviews trends in international political processes by examining renowned foreign academic journals. The latest issue, which focuses on civic education, was presented by Bulcsú Zsiga.

Egon Rónai led a discussion with the invited politician guests, László L. Simon (Fidesz) and Ildikó Lendvai (MSZP – Hungarian Socialist Party). The main aim was to show the differences between the leadership styles and practices during the MSZP and Fidesz governments. The discussion touched on the functioning of parliamentary factions; the personalities of Hungarian political leaders such as Gyula Horn, Viktor Orbán, Ferenc Gyurcsány, and Péter Magyar; and the lack of female political leaders in Hungary.

The director of CFPA, Ervin Csizmadia, presented certain aspects of our newly published study with colleagues Júlia Lakatos and Zoltán Novák. Based on the lessons learned from an international study, it examined whether a country's local cultural traditions can override general international trends. In our analysis, we also examined what makes a good leader, i.e., what was expected of political leaders in different eras. While in the past, society and mainstream political science looked to large-format politicians (Charles De Gaulle, Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher) as examples, in Hungary, after 1989, those who excelled in adopting and managing Western models were

seen as good leaders. This has changed in the last 10-15 years. Fidesz's model strives to assert national sovereignty, thus it is often labeled as populist or authoritarian. This is in part because Viktor Orbán believes that the pre-1989, large-format leadership style was more effective than the current leadership style of the European Union, which follows a management leadership style. Charles De Gaulle believed in the European project, but also supported national sovereignty. The current tension lies in the conflict between institutions and political leaders, i.e., according to populists, institutions cannot override the role of political leaders.

So what do voters look for in a leader today? Regardless of country or culture: competence, integrity, and authenticity are the most important for voters. All of this applies to the Hungarian context as well, but here the generational issue is also very significant. Péter Magyar has emerged as a challenger who is also trying to reframe Orbán's ideas: while Orbán focuses on foreign policy issues, Magyar focuses on the growing number of domestic political problems and their solutions. Of the two, the leader who makes the better offer and is better able to communicate with voters will likely emerge victorious. It is also clear that Péter Magyar wants to copy the political style that Viktor Orbán represented in his 1998 election victory, running on a similar platform of strengthening civil society, creating a better functioning state, and better policies.

The difference between the Tisza Party and Fidesz is in their development. Fidesz has transformed significantly over the past 25 years, while the Tisza Party is still in its infancy. What could Viktor Orbán's main goal actually be? To retain power? To become a player in world politics? We also addressed this in our study. Fidesz and Orbán want to make history. Bringing an end to the so-called Hungarian misfortune can be considered such a long-term goal. This requires a leader who pursues national policies and represents a national ideology that the masses can rally behind, in contrast to the Hungarian opposition of the past 15 years. Péter Magyar is now exploring this as well, but many questions remain to be answered before he can move beyond the previous unsuccessful parliamentary opposition.