

# Outlook for Hungary for 2020

## Summary

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*Hungarian politics in 2020 will be different from 2019 in a number of ways.*

*After years of paralysis and disarray of the Hungarian non-Fidesz opposition, they are back in the political game after a surprise non-defeat at the municipal elections in October 2019. The surprise result of the local elections is the single most important political event in a decade and their aftermath is closely watched for signs of where the country might be going. In January 2020 it is still too early to tell how exactly strategies and politics would change – either on Fidesz’ side or in the opposition. The shock and surprise of the not complete victory had visibly shaken Fidesz politicians and the party is slow to draw conclusions.*

*Orbán may also be reluctant to openly commit to any new direction before Fidesz’ situation in the European People’s Party (EPP) is settled, one way or the other. There is also the Article 7 procedure hanging above him, and – more importantly – the fate of the EU development funds and their continued flow to the regime. Both, however, are spectacularly opaque for outsiders to follow – and it tells all we need to know about the image problems of the European Union. When decision will be reached, it will be as much a surprise for the public as Orbán’s decisions are domestically – we have no way to predict either.*

*This essay will focus on Hungarian domestic issues for two reasons. The first one is that there have been no significant changes in the international situation since last year that affect Hungarian politics. The country is still exposed to the same processes in global and European politics and in the global economy – the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this document. The other reason is that there are significant changes going on domestically that have the potential to bring back political competition, public debate, and even political compromise into Hungarian politics.*

*For the first time in years, the non-Fidesz opposition also merits some discussion. Not in their tedious inner dealings and supposed ideological stance – but their use of the powers (albeit small and waning) they have found after the municipal elections, and the chances of their anti-Fidesz coalitions because that would be the single most relevant factor running up to the 2022 general elections.*

*Questions emerge. Firstly, whether the economy can finally become a political issue in Hungary. Secondly, what measures Fidesz will take to block the opposition from gaining further ground – either politically or in terms of communication. The answer to this question will likely only emerge after Fidesz' place in their European party family has been settled, but before the 2022 general elections.*

*The uninitiated outsider might also ask naïve questions such as the political consequences of the defeat for Orbán, whether he would resign or whether Fidesz could split – but these questions rest on the assumption that Hungary is a country where democratic politics is still taking place (i.e. there is a back and forth between more than one political force that keep each other in check and make consequences happen). In reality, it is just being decided.*

*We will discuss how Fidesz may or may not change strategy after the elections and whether the opposition can turn Fidesz' weaknesses into political capital. Unfortunately, there are not many concrete facts to go by as Orbán is visibly postponing any reaction until after his situation in or out of the EPP is settled and he knows more about the Article 7 procedure in Brussels.*

# Introduction

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2019 has been a year of two elections in Hungary.

Had Orbán supporters proved to be right, it would have been the last two election challenges for Fidesz before Orbán's unquestioned rule solidified in the country - and the legal system. Indeed, his men were openly preparing for 'Orbán 2030' in interviews and on T-shirts, signaling that after the crushing victory they score against the fragmented and dispirited opposition, there will be no more chances to dismount Orbán. And they were partially right. Had they won both 2019 elections the way they did the general elections in 2018, Fidesz would have been cemented into power for a long time – and its dissenters sunk into apathy and irrelevance.

It had not happened, and that is the single most significant change in Hungarian politics since 2010.

Orbán's partial defeat at the municipal elections has the potential to bring back politics (i.e. a back and force among more than one political force to gain and keep power) and maybe even actual ideology in Hungarian politics.

The first election to discuss is the European Parliamentary election. Naturally, Orbán's Fidesz won by an unbeatable margin. It was, however, not coupled with similar victories by fellow nationalist populist parties across Europe, so the identitarian breakthrough has been postponed for now.

But the most relevant thing about the EP election wasn't Orbán's victory. It was the opposition's results. Without the shackles of the need to form coalitions opposition parties have gained an insight into their respective support base and measured each other up. According to general consensus two parties have emerged victorious, Momentum and DK, sending two MEPs to Brussels each – while the others have started to sink to the bottom. Those four MEPs haven't spent their time sitting back either – but spread the news about Orbán's regime. They have been a thorn in Orbán's side ever since as well as targets of the Orbánist media.

In October 2019 Hungary held local municipal elections. To everyone's surprise, the opposition didn't lose completely. All-opposition coalition candidates won in Budapest and ten major cities. This was the first election of any kind since 2006 that Fidesz didn't win completely.

Fidesz didn't lose a single voter. In fact, they mobilized even more successfully than any time before. But this time so did the anti-Orbán opposition.

To give an idea how mind-boggling the results were, there are a few comparisons. In the EP-elections in May 2019 283 thousand people voted for Fidesz' party list in Budapest. In October 2019 307 thousand voted for Fidesz' mayoral candidate in Budapest.

General elections are in a different league with participations much higher than local ones, but even there Fidesz is at an all-time high according to official count. The number of voters for Fidesz' list in the 2018 general elections was half a million higher than in 2014 – and election they also won by a plurality – triggering Orbán's all-important two-third supermajority in parliament, the pillar of his unstoppable attack on liberal democracy.

On October 2019, however, the opposition did not split its votes and managed to agree on coalition candidates in roughly two-thirds of big cities. The fragmented opposition is a key factor in Orbán's election victories – fragmentation on the non-Orbán side of the political divide is thus wildly encouraged and facilitated with every legal and political means possible.

Orbán's very own election law made it impossible for multiple parties to compete for power with an actual chance to win – it only allowed for a two-party system. And with Fidesz being the only top-down, single-person, monolithic political brand, it was Fidesz vs everyone else.

The potential for an all-opposition coalition to severely beat Orbán has been demonstrated first as early as February 2018, when a mayoral by-election in Hódmezővásárhely (an unquestioned Fidesz stronghold) was lost to an all-opposition candidate, who went door to door, trying to counteract Fidesz' media dominance and limitless financial resources. The Hódmezővásárhely-model thus became the blueprint for the only road the opposition could take if they ever want to fight Orbán. But it took years for them to come to an agreement in the majority of cities – as well as the complete resignation that they don't have a chance to win anyway.

After October 2019, 3.57 million (out of 5.8 million) Hungarians who live in 10k+ towns now have a non-Fidesz mayor. And the amount of money these mayors dispose over is also interesting.<sup>i</sup> According to data drawn from the National Office of Statistics and local budget information, G7.hu, an economic portal calculated that opposition mayors will dispose over 48.5% of corporate income tax revenue in Hungary.<sup>ii</sup> Local corporate taxes are an important source of revenue for towns and cities – mostly because everything else has been taken away from them during Orbán's earlier moves against local autonomy. But they are still allowed to collect up to 2% of tax from corporations on their territory – giving 77% of their revenues. They

have to beg the government for every other resource, including permission to win EU tenders (the permission being contingent on their election results), but cities are the economic backbone of the country, with Budapest giving about 40% of the country's GDP.

The first thought on everyone's mind was that the government can just push a piece of legislation through parliament overnight and take all of cities' resources and EU funds away. It has not happened yet – but it might once Orbán's so-called 100 day patience period for Budapest is over. (100 days is also the smallest amount of time Orbán needs to sort out Brussels and the EPP before he gets down to handle the newly risen opposition.)

G7.hu also made an interesting calculation about the amount spent on public procurement contracts in the towns that went to the opposition but were under a Fidesz mayor during the last five years. According to this calculation, Fidesz has lost control over 1.3 billion euros' worth of public procurement. That is money their loyalists do not (automatically) get now, money that may go to opposition elements. As we will see there are signs that cities' stripping of resources is indeed already drafted, with EU-funds being the first to be taken away from them. No wonder Eastern European capital cities are now trying to build a network, lobbying for access to development funds without interference from their respective governments.

The local election non-victory was a great shock for Orbán and Fidesz. In his first reaction, Orbán declared victory and promised to accept the decision of Budapest citizens and to cooperate (which is not what he was telling before the election when he visited most swing constituencies and threatened them with migrants and stopping all development in case the Fidesz candidate does not win.)

The election appeared to be a clean and uneventful victory for Orbán until a whistleblowing website started leaking information about the alleged corruption of the Fidesz mayor of the city of Győr, complete with a sex tape where the politician is filmed using prostitutes on a yacht in Croatia. It is not thought to have influenced the results, but it had definitely caused a rare communication chaos within Fidesz in the days running up to the election.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The juiciest question on everyone's mind was whether the infamous sex tape mayor would win again, despite the scandal. He did. He was then dropped from Fidesz, but not asked to resign. He then resigned in the hope that another Fidesz candidate can take his seat. Had he resigned before the October 2019 elections, the opposition candidate could have had a strong chance to win.

This election may look like a story of the emergence of the opposition – but it is not. It was still about Orbán, his person, his brand, and protest votes against him. By 2019, protest against him has built up into as formidable a force as his support base is.

Orbán did not lose this election, but Hungary is no longer a single-party state, no longer a “central force field” as Orbán likes to call himself, referring to the elimination of concurrent political parties. The so-called (also by Orbán) “dual-pole politics” is back – meaning that there is an opposition after all.

It doesn't mean that Orbán will be defeated any time soon. It just means that a non-Orbán Hungary exists and – for the first time since 2010 – knows about its own existence. To understand what that means, one must understand how deeply hopeless it appeared just a day earlier.

It is not that those opposition parties are back either. The uneasy coalition that formed for this election took nine long years for the opposition to build, and it was only meant to defeat Orbán. It was a reluctant acknowledgement of the new electoral law that made it impossible for more than two sides to compete. So they formed a single side – despite their differences and despite the best and nastiest effort of Fidesz – but there was no love in it. And it will get even more difficult to set a single candidate for the coming elections – now that there is a real chance of winning. It was the certainty of defeat, the death of hope that made an all-opposition coalition possible for the parties involved. It made them put aside their egos, but only because there were no juicy mayoral seats to look forward to, anyway. But now there are.

The single-party political force field is over and politics is back in Hungary. Both for Orbán and for the opposition.

It is the first and biggest crack on Orbán's system so far.

This was the first election (of any kind) since 2006 that Orbán did not win. He did not lose it either. His party has not weakened and most of the Fidesz mayors who lost their seats have not lost any votes compared to the last local elections in 2014. But for a strongman who built his system on the myth of his undefeatability, this is a crushing non-victory.

The psychological impact on the population cannot be overestimated.

The futility of resistance is the cornerstone of authoritarianism. It is learned helplessness. When its victims internalize that there is nothing they can do, there is nothing they can change, no courts, no media, no election, no protest can achieve anything – they will be much cheaper to

subdue. And once they have internalized that sense of helplessness, it is very difficult to unlearn it.

A democratic politician can accept a setback, even a defeat, and carry on. An autocrat cannot afford to slow down or show any weakness. An autocrat is in a corner. For an autocrat it is an uninterrupted chain of victories or political death – maybe even prison if there was corruption involved.

A day before the local election Orbán's defeat was unimaginable in Hungary and apathy was so tangible, people were reluctant to even get outraged at scandals. When the impossibly outrageous sex tapes and corruption allegations against a local Fidesz strongman emerged, some people were actually quick to opine that “well, at least we know who he is. We don't know the opposition yet.” Meaning that they managed to justify and swallow the incredible insult of a local politician having paid sex on a yacht on their taxpayer money – not to mention the wealth he was supposedly hiding in plain sight and on the Maldives. When voters justified it for themselves they were motivated not by their love of crooks but their sense of helplessness. Now that the ice is broken, now that outrage appeared to have worked, they will be much quicker to get angry next time. The next scandal, the next whistleblower will probably meet with a more engaged audience.

The next election will also probably see more activists who dare to expose themselves as non-Orbánists. The next election will see a bickering opposition and a massively changed Orbán.

Orbán makes mistakes when he is angry, and he knows it. That, however, does not stop anyone from making those mistakes nonetheless. He appears to have fallen out of character and lets his personality shine through more often than he should – giving away information. His long-standing avoidance of non-dependent media was probably a well-founded strategy.

Orbán's greatest fear is said to be losing an election due to complacency - ever since his 2002 shock – and that is exactly what happened in 2019. Some argue that he had lost touch. Some guess that information may even be withheld from him. Neither of which is surprising if one knows the logic of authoritarianism, filling up ranks with loyalists. Loyalty is the single greatest counterselection mechanism known to humankind, ultimately giving false signals even to the politician on top of the pyramid.

For those following Hungarian politics the most significant question now is how the defeat had changed Fidesz (if at all) and what new direction Orbán may take.

It has been three months since the local municipal elections, but the post-election domestic political landscape has not taken shape yet – partly because the new direction hasn't been decided inside Fidesz, and partly because Orbán is putting off any change until after his battles in Europe are settled. All we have for now is the usual tools of Kremlinology, looking at surface symptoms and parsing Fidesz politicians' actions and remarks, to deduct any meaning and glean an insight.

There is no way to find out just now how exactly the new political landscape will turn out but there are things that have already changed:

*The myth of Orbán's invincibility is gone*

*There is an opposition on the political map*

*The art of politics appears to have returned. Reluctantly. For now.*

After the events in 2019 the opposition may still relapse into irrelevance. But Orbán's myth of invincibility will not be back any time soon.

## The immediate aftermath

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The immediate aftermath of the local elections was a delight to watch. Fidesz was shockingly unprepared for even such a tiny defeat and reacted with discord and reaching out to complain to the outsiders. The surprise results have shaken Fidesz politicians, who scrambled to make sense of the new reality while also trying to bide their time before handing over their offices.

One of the worst miscalculations after the defeat took place in the town of Jászberény, where a repeat election turned Fidesz' tight loss into crushing defeat. After the initial defeat, Fidesz contested the results and called for a repeat election that took place in November 2019. And then Fidesz' worst fear was confirmed. With an opposition proven to have a chance, even more anti-Orbán voters turned up to cast their votes on the repeated election and the anti-Fidesz, all-opposition coalition candidate scored an even bigger win than in October. The opposition's lead leapt from 14 votes in October to 3758 votes in November, while participation rose from 42.58% to 62%.<sup>iii</sup>

If anyone had any doubt whether the lack of chance for a change had kept opposition voters at home and thus contributed to Orbán's uncontested rule until October 2019, it was gone now.

Previously unimaginable things have taken place since October 2019. These things are nothing earth-shaking in a democracy, but they couldn't have happened just a day earlier: The government sat down with the non-Fidesz mayor of Budapest and agreed to compromise on Budapest's financing in exchange for having their athletic world championship and yet another stadium in the south of Pest. An opposition MPs bill went through to discussion in parliament. Not a vote – but this was still new. Fidesz mayors and strongmen talked to independent media (some anonymously), mostly complaining. Fidesz mayors openly blamed Orbán himself for their defeat.

The anomaly only truly makes sense when one puts it in context. Since 2010 the Orbán-regime changed track on public pressure (no matter how weak) only a total number of four times.<sup>2</sup> Neither of them resulted from active resistance of voters – and that is significant because it didn't really lift the fog of helplessness. This election result was the first when active resistance, voting, had resulted in a kick into Orbán's regime.

## Things Fidesz blamed for the defeat

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Naturally, ex post explanations of the defeat have immediately started to come in, especially from Fidesz politicians. Usually, it is not difficult to ascertain how a surprise election result could have happened – with hindsight. This time, however, both Fidesz and non-Fidesz analysts are coming up short.

The first group of possible explanations came from Fidesz' ranks – in the shape of (hitherto unimaginable) comments and complaints made to the media. These immediate reactions were uncoordinated (a rare sign of disorganization within Fidesz party ranks) and mostly

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<sup>2</sup> 1) The first was in 2012 when a months-long online protest and scathing ridicule has forced the President, Pál Schmitt, to resign for plagiarism. But the position of the president is only symbolic. 2) The second crack happened in 2014 when mass protests broke out at the proposal of an internet tax – a minor item on the government ongoing taxation drive, yet with surprising galvanizing power. But the proposal was not a law yet and Orbán managed to push the defeat on a minion who then drowned the issue into a “consultation with the people”. 3) In 2016 Fidesz had to perform a U-turn on the mandatory, but wildly unpopular, Sunday closure of retail stores when a referendum about it became possibility. But this retreat was not a win for the opposition, or the expression of discontent by the people. The reason it was cancelled was in the opinion polls – a passive form of resistance. 4) In 2017 a new political movement, Momentum, successfully managed to get a draft referendum question through the election committee and collected a stunning number of signatures against Orbán's pipedream for Budapest to host the 2024 Olympic Games. By this time singing one's name and ID number under a question Orbán obviously disliked has become an act of political courage, the most active type of resistance – until the local election results of October 2019.

psychological. It was curious to see what they told themselves, whom they instinctively chose to blame.

Almost as soon as the ballots were counted and mayors who lost their seats started speaking up there was word that Fidesz pollsters, even the ones for internal use, have been way out of the ballpark. The natural explanation is hiding non-Fidesz voters. After nine years of Orbán's rule, and the entire society saturated with fear of consequences, there are not many people who are reckless enough to report non-Orbán political sympathies on the phone to a caller who claims to be a pollster. Especially since we have fake pollsters. But that is not the explanation Fidesz mayors embraced. They chose instead to accuse the pollsters of being lousy.

It is a curious fact that Fidesz is so top-down that even the local mayors get their campaigning advice from the top – or “the center” as they put it. Advisors are dispatched from Budapest and their prescriptions must be followed to the letter. There were multiple cases when the local Fidesz clearly stated that those numbers look off – but were ignored.

In an unprecedented move, even “the centrum” (i.e. Orbán himself) has been blamed. After all, nothing is permitted without the headquarters' say-so and all their centrally issued commands must be executed to the letter and without delays. So if they failed to send out the mayoral candidates to do door-to-door, if they gave them the wrong sound bites to repeat, or if they didn't write better speeches – it is on the headquarters, not the minions. In a radically top-down organization like Fidesz, responsibility is always at the top. No one can even reach “the center” with bad news.

Indeed, an oft-repeated criticism is that Orbán is now out of touch, partially because of this top-down only information flow. No place for local knowledge or less-than-great news in the system of top-down loyalism as they are labeled as naysayers and *can't do* – but it comes at a price. In a press conference in January Orbán has accepted blame – but heads are still expected to roll for the defeat.

Almost immediately after the defeat Fidesz opinion makers were quick to provide spiritual solace by shifting the blame away from Fidesz. Their choice of scapegoats were “foreigners in the inner city”, the ignorant/globalist/treasonous votes of “foreigners” who lived in the inner city of Budapest. This was a very self-serving – if statistically impossible – theory. Not only does it not explain the other cities Fidesz lost, there aren't even enough non-Hungarian citizens

resident in Hungary to sway the elections. (Not to mention that there is absolutely no way to know legally how or whether they have voted.)<sup>3</sup>

There has been another line of thinking that was amusing to watch, blaming ideologically confused opposition voters for demolishing Orbán's "central force field" theory. A few party columnists and talking heads were angrily lashing out at opposition voters for daring to join forces and vote at each other's candidates. The non-Fidesz political side is fragmented – often at the bidding of Orbán himself, who is famous for employing the so-called salami-tactic, a favored election tactic of both Nazis and communists. By slicing up his enemies into ever-smaller bits, he essentially drops them out of contest. Orbán has also preferred to pose as occupying the middle (i.e. the "central force field") – as one of his opposition parties, Jobbik, used to be even further right on the imaginary political spectrum – therefore making it impossible for Jobbik's and Orbán's other enemy parties' voters to vote for the same candidate. So when we heard the minister sneering on camera and comparing opposition voters who united behind a common candidate to Jews who voted for Nazis and "maybe even enjoyed it", this is what he was trying to express.

Orbán has long been pushing the message that it is either him or the enemy. From a political perspective, non-Fidesz voters may have taken Orbán's message seriously. If there were really only two options arranged around his persona, then the choice is between him and not him. And protest voters took a hint.

Another line of thinking was that Fidesz ignored climate change talk for too long and they needed to dive in. The reason for Fidesz' anti-environmentalist stance is self-explanatory. According to nationalists of the Earth the "communists" occupy the climate agenda globally, so the nationalists must occupy a viciously anti-environmentalist position.

Because politics everywhere is now about trench warfare, not about policy, not about solution, not about real problems, not even about dumb ideology. If your enemy takes up a stance in any issue, no matter how stupid or ill-defined, you are politically obligated to take up a diametrically opposite stance. The two-party gang war is thus incapable to ever deliver solutions, because they don't even have a way to contemplate their problem definition. Politics

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<sup>3</sup> In a private blog post following up his public thoughts one of the government's top pundits also helpfully pointed out that by foreigners they mean people with suspiciously Jewish names. To illustrate that the message sank in, a week after the elections a gang of self-described neo-Nazis have marched and attacked a Jewish pub in Budapest, in broad daylight during a national holiday – and event that couldn't go down if it really irritated authorities.

is just digging trenches to gain power and then use it to gain access public money and immunity – while using communication instead of governance.

Naturally, no politician in Putin’s army can ever take side against fossil fuels, so Orbán’s stance would have been dictated even without a green candidate becoming the mayor of Budapest. But now that he did, Orbán had to put an anti-environmentalist foot down.

Another line of thinking blamed the whistleblower, who started leaking information about a Fidesz mayor’s (well documented in media) corruption while also posting a sex tape of him. It started a few weeks before the elections and the leaks lasted until the very last day, attracting a prodigious number of visitors according to the public statistics of the whistleblowing blog. But as spectacular (and tacky) that sex tape was, it didn’t really influence election results – as evidenced by the fact that said Fidesz mayor actually won again.

Before the elections an unusual communication chaos unfolded in Fidesz regarding the sex tape mayor. Someone wanted him to resign and a call for his resignation was even posted in an anonymous editorial op-ed on an Orbánist site, Pravda-style. But then the op-ed was pulled and the mayor called off a press conference that was widely expected to be his resignation. Clearly, someone intervened. According to rumors, it was Orbán himself who stepped in. The sex tape mayor eventually won the election. When Orbán was facing the problem of solving the PR catastrophe after the elections, he still didn’t remove the mayor, he just dropped him from Fidesz. So the whistleblower might not have made a dent on Fidesz’ image – but their handling of the scandal did.

Yet another line of thinking blamed the extremely simplistic, insultingly dumbed-down campaign that was centrally forced on local mayors. The message about the non-Fidesz candidates was this: Unfit, unfit, un-fit, UN-FIT!

Fidesz has long applied a toxic combination of intimidation and arrogance to its approach to shaping public opinion. Intimidation makes people shape their minds and arrogance intimidates them. Until it irritates them more than it intimidates. In the preceding campaigns Orbán’s communication team has successfully pushed extremely simplistic, one-word campaign slogans (that have also served as a party program). Soros, migrants, terrorism. In an average TV news in Orbán’s media these words have been spoken more times in a sentence than it was linguistically possible. Government spokesmen spoke Soros’ name dozens of times per minute as a response to literally any question on any topic. The method worked.

But public opinion may be adaptive – as well as simplistic. One-word slogans might have worked once, but the new set of one-word slogans proved to be too familiar in their simplicity – and may have triggered a backlash. Shrugging off the non-Fidesz candidates as “unfit, unfit, and unfit”, comparing them to a “circus” and a “demolition derby”, putting up posters that depicted them as clowns did not work this time.

One thing Fidesz politicians didn’t blame, not even anonymously, was corruption, or even the perception thereof.

These were all psychological reactions. The strategic blame took longer to place. It was the organizational conclusion they eventually drew from the results. Heads falling. New directions taken. New communication. By December, the organizational conclusion has been drawn: Fidesz needs to talk to young people.

## Fidesz’ Bermuda triangle: Youth – Healthcare - Climate

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There are three sticky issues that Fidesz needs to address – and only one of them is their choice.

By December Fidesz appeared to be in the last stages of drawing conclusions from the October election defeat - and youth were it. And they are not blaming Fidesz for failing (to communicate to) youth. They are blaming youth for not voting Fidesz. And youth-blaming is curiously similar between ages and across geography.

The narrative that Fidesz lost youth had spread through pro-government media like wildfire after the municipal elections. Fidesz is still commanding a huge lead ahead of other parties among young people. But not as overwhelming as it does in other age groups. And with a considerable number of them reaching voting age by the 2022 general elections, it appears to be a pressing problem. Mobilizing the youth vote could make or break Fidesz’ campaign in 2022 – but for now, they are losing the battle to other parties, most notably Momentum. According to a study by the Academy of Science, Momentum even beats Fidesz among university students. Not enough to beat them as a party, but enough to make Fidesz politicians give disappointed comments about youth and students in particular. The reluctant “talking-to” to young people has thus commenced within Fidesz – with predictably hilarious and counterproductive results. (And so did the demonizing of Momentum.)

Hungary may not have rich Boomers as their entire generation was devastated by socialism, but we still have our very own version of the Boomer vs Millennial war. It takes the shape of old, public-money-rich Fidesz politicians griping about ungrateful youth for not voting for them

and not having a blind, ethnic identity by which they can be yanked in whatever direction these corrupt, old politicians want them to.

More and more Fidesz politicians and talking heads are swarming TV studios and write columns lashing out at youth for the poor showing of Fidesz at the local elections. In April 2018 Fidesz managed around 49% nationwide – but only 37% among the under-30s and 41% in 30-39. Orbán’s support base is now 50+ and steadily ageing – it doesn’t bode well for him.

Arguably, a party whose head has commissioned the oldest, poshest and stalest restaurant to cater in his new office that he built himself in the Castle District of Old Buda, and whose image is fundamentalist traditionalism, complete with a silent and out-of-work wife, pig slaughter and eating greaves straight from the bucket, chased down by a shot of pálinka, would always have a slight image problem with under 50s. And it might have issues with youthfulness in the future.

A strong evidence that Fidesz decided that “youth” is a challenge are a few appointments since the local elections – one of them young and even female, introducing herself in a totally youthful and hip video, using informal *you* to address Hungarians – a wildly unusual thing to do, especially in the voter base of Fidesz. But that wasn’t the only clunky attempt at so-called communicating-to-youth. Fidesz talking heads have commented and written about the topic of youth in many places – and they all betray a self-righteous condemnation where the self-critical openness should be. A professor of Hungarology was blaming youth for not having a strong enough “Hungarian consciousness”, only 15-20% (whatever that might be, but everything sounds more scientific if you put it in percentages). Another opined that non-Hungarian tales weaken children’s ethnic identification to the point where ethnicity might not even be enough to tell them how to vote. They may even go as far as voting against their government, sounded one talking head. A Fidesz mayor mused that political identities no longer run in families, people change their votes based on things that are not born with them and that is lamentable.

Fidesz’ youth arm has also been called for action. Fidelitas doesn’t enjoy a good reputation in Orbán’s eyes. Their below-and-beyond loyalty is unquestionable, but they have repeatedly failed to deliver the youth vote. (The two things might be related.) This time they came up with an especially embarrassing campaign that included all the so-called youthful things, like #hashtags, smartphones, selfies and Instagram – as a spoonful of sugar that would make stale nationalism go down. Fidelitas called for selfies with young people’s favorite quotes from a particular Hungarian poet in exchange for a chance to win youthful things like a drone or a Spotify – but all they received was countless O1G references (an abbreviation of a rude term people call Orbán). And since they used hashtags instead of comments, they couldn’t even moderate.

In a way, it is amusing to watch. For now. But Orbán's propaganda machine will soon iron out the details, and get back on the horse on this one.

Youth is the only one the three topics that Fidesz chose to tackle on its own accord. But the other two topics, climate and healthcare, are coming at Fidesz despite their reluctance to address them. And just like with "youth", Orbán cannot say a single thing about these issues without betraying his sizzling condemnation – and neither can his men. (But his ability of distraction is prodigious.)

The issue of climate is not only alien to Orbán – it is not a very well entrenched topic in Hungarian political discourse. Indeed, when surveyed by Eurobarometer, Hungarian youth was the only one in Europe (15-24) that didn't put climate change on top of its priority of concerns. It was healthcare and economic survival.<sup>iv</sup> (Croatia was also slightly off the European trend by answering employment as the major concern of youth.) Hungarians and Hungarian youth are notoriously uninterested in anything beyond their financial survival – a clear symptom of feeling helpless in all aspects of life and feel more comfortable to believe whatever the government wants them to – but economic survival is still something they have to keep looking at from their own point of view.

In the global trench warfare Orbán's enemies have settled on climate as their scary thing of choice, The Thing Politicians Need Empowerment To Tackle. For Orbán, it was simply foreigners and enemies of the Hungarian ethnicity (i.e. migrants and Soros) and climate wasn't even denied. It wasn't an issue. Globally, Orbán's allies have been pushed into a defiantly anti-environmentalist corner. Many, no doubt, feels at home there, and others have a vested interest in anti-environmentalism. But the most important reason why many of them are anti-environment is that the other side is pro-climate. Or, to put it in his own, simplistic terms, the *communists* are. So far Orbán could choose to ignore it and the issue of climate-related policymaking only came up vaguely, in the framework of European politics.

But with a green mayor elected to lead Budapest, environmental considerations keep popping up on Orbán's home field as well.

Naturally, climate talk is as difficult for a Fidesz politician as youth-talk is. The confusion is best illustrated by swinging back and forth between claiming that climate change doesn't exist and that Hungary is a climate-champion. The first came from an underdog, the second came from Orbán the next day.

In general, Orbán's maneuvering to correct communication mistakes looks like an oil tanker trying to turn around in a hot tub. His major problem is his own previous success and communication absolutism. His chosen topics have already covered the whole country, there isn't any bandwidth left for anything else – not to mention that the simplistic, single-issue campaign was exactly the point. The Soros-migrant-hysteria didn't just cost a sizeable chunk of tax revenues to create – it was also meant to be the cure-all for every problem, response to every questions, in every age group, and in all segments of society. Its shrill whistle tuned out every chance of rational discussion – like the one about an actual, real threat to citizens' lives: underfunded state healthcare.

Orbán's stadium obsession and its contrast with the disintegration of state-funded healthcare due to lack of funding has even made it to the international media.<sup>v</sup> And since the two are financed from the same pocket, the taxpayers', who are also exposed to the healthcare collapsing and corrupt system (whether they visit state facilities or opt for private healthcare), the comparison is perfectly adequate. It is a testament to the effectiveness of Orbán's blanket propaganda that his core supporters, over-50s, haven't chalked it up to him (yet) because a single visit to any medical establishment in the country would fill anyone with well-justified terror (unlike migrants). Tens of thousands of lives have been lost due to underfunding as Hungarian healthcare plunges according to every kind of metric and European comparison, as people consider a trip to a hospital more risky than just hoping that they get better somehow. At any rate, their chances of being seen by the overworked and underpaid medical staff are meagre – and when they are, treatment might be lacking due to shortage.

Meanwhile, Orbán's recurring gripe is that hospitals keep hoarding debt – i.e. they keep ordering supplies even when state funding runs out halfway through the financial year. So far, his ramblings have been only met by the usual outrage of the non-Fidesz media, they are yet to cause trouble for him.

Healthcare has been one of the issues identified as dangerous to Fidesz. But Orbán still can't say anything that isn't completely tone deaf and didn't betray his disgust with public healthcare users.

In January 2020, at the only press conference he gives in a year (which is carefully crafted in a way that it doesn't really pose a risk to him) he addressed healthcare, for instance. The mere fact that he did it was extraordinary – Fidesz simply ignores topics that are not in their interest. But the way he addressed it had incensed those who heard it. Instead of giving yet another meaningless promise, denying the existence of the problem, or listing a number of tiny and irrelevant achievements in the field, he slightly elaborated, giving away his irritation.

He started with promising to have every hospital waiting room, social room and ward painted, if they were painted over three years ago. (He actually listed all the types of room a patient might see on the inside, which is not just a typical case of command-economy style micromanagement by a politician, but also open cynicism, especially considering how little he spoke about healthcare altogether.) He then quickly added (for some reason) that he will not give any extra funds for this, it must come at the expense of hospital development and new diagnostic equipment. Then he moved on to his real focal point, hospitals getting into debt and griped that it is illegal for hospitals to go into debt, highlighting it as the most important thing is that it has to stop in 2020. But their funding will not increase.

This is all just breathtakingly unnecessary and completely tone deaf – a testament to why Orbán needs to keep his personality out of the public view. His remarks about healthcare have been the most elaborate in a long time, and they may never reach the people who are dependent on his media for information. But inciting against directors of hospitals appears to be a recurring theme – and the go-to Fidesz reaction to healthcare-related questions. One gets the impression that Fidesz politicians hear Orbán speak at private meetings – and then swarm out to repeat his sound bites, trains of thought, and hobby horses. For healthcare it is hospital debt.

Scapegoating and enemy-forming have been his go-to communication tools and war mentality his only political modus operandi. But it is questionable whether they can be applied in this case. When a hospital starts a donation drive to ask for bathroom appliances and basic medication as Christmas gift, the ministry of human resources may make them stop and apologize for ruining the government's PR – but PR won't solve this particular issue.

Since the construction industry is painfully crony-infested, it is also easy to see how the waiting room decorating drive will just be another opportunity for oligarchs – and another way to keep construction workers busy now that Orbán's mega stadium has been completed and free capacity fell back on the construction sector.

Another thing that might turn out to be Fidesz' healthcare Waterloo is the increasing discontent among doctors. Underpaid medical staff is not allowed to protest or strike, but the pro-Fidesz leadership of the doctors' guild has been overthrown in a surprise vote in 2019 – and the new leadership has started making demands. It appears like a minor thing, but nothing has been done before. Healthcare in 2020 might easily become a black swan that steals Fidesz' hot dog – and if that happens, Orbán won't have enough time to make amends before the 2022 elections, a few freshly painted waiting rooms won't do. But his first reaction appears to be trying to demonize medical workers and it might end up working.

## Old-new phenomena on the political and media landscape

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The election defeat triggered phenomena long unseen on the Hungarian political landscape to reappear. Fidesz politicians give interviews to non-dependent media – it is a huge thing in itself. Not only that, but they allow themselves some – incredibly soft – criticism of Fidesz and even Orbán. There are complaints and whiney grievances for the election defeat. They are often anonymous, but we did not even have that until now.

There are also heads rolling and not one, but two Fidesz corruption cases are on trial. Minor ones and don't touch the higher echelons, and they might just be an internal message rather than a purge meant for appeasing the public. But we are definitely witnessing a new stage of Fidesz' rule.

There is even what appears to be political compromise reemerging on the political scene – that may, however, prove to be temporary.

Here are a few examples of comments made by Fidesz politicians to the non-dependent media since October 2019. These comments' sheer existence is an event – and their content is a clue we can use.

Shortly after the elections a few critical pieces appeared to everyone's surprise.

A publicist of Magyar Nemzet, the flagship daily swallowed by Orbán's media, had dared to talk to Orbán with a hint of constructive criticism (a distinctly Soviet-style thing). It was written in an incredibly subservient style – but it is still criticism. It appeared as a letter to Orbán, even though his name is not explicitly mentioned. It reads like a love sonnet by a hurt, abused spouse: *"We need to finally talk! ... What is between us is not what it used to be, you can feel it, too. When we first met, we smiled at each other and you said "Listen to your heart!" And we did that, we went after you. With you. We didn't regret it. It was beautiful, it was uplifting, even at times when we ran into something bad. ... We used to talk about our problems, we used to talk it out, and even if we bickered sometimes, our disputes were amicable. We bickered for each other. Back then, you were honest! ... These days, there is no honest chitchat between us. You rarely listen to us anymore. Even when you do, you do not care about our opinions, you're doing what you think is right. We stand by you, even though few actually know what is happening around you anymore. Do you really think everything is as it used to be? Is it possible that you are wrong? You took us for granted and moved on. Maybe because you know that we are here, that we will always remain your believers, you can do anything to us. Don't do it! Be kind again, be loveable like you used to be!"*<sup>vi</sup>

He was not the only publicist, who dared the unimaginable and gently scolded Orbán to bring back the good old days when they were friends and they were all allowed to talk to him. He was reacting to another Orbánist publicist, who said similar things: "*The human voice disappeared along with admitting to mistakes, explaining successes, and the curious dialogue, the interest in other opinions. Instead, we have strongman politics and messages crafted by think-tanks and carefully measured out by pollsters.*" He also opined "Fidesz irritates more and more people," "many are angry at the government," and the way the government "cooperates with the citizens" rubs them entirely the wrong way.<sup>vii</sup>

There were a few surprisingly senior Fidesz members who commented. One of the is Fidesz-founder and outgoing constitutional judge István Stumpf, who said that while polls paint a rosy picture about the government, he senses a "significant dissatisfaction amongst some conservative intellectuals, as values that were previously held dear are forced into the background, and local leaders of Fidesz know no boundaries or standards." Stumpf doesn't blame Orbán for the dissatisfaction, but clearly on the behavior of some party members, possibly joining the ranks of those who think that the sex tape mayor single-handedly brought down Fidesz. He also mentioned the youth and sensed that they are morally motivated to change the government, then he called Orbán perhaps old and tired.

In December 2019, József Répás<sup>viii</sup>, the reelected Fidesz mayor of Kiskunlacháza gave an unusual interview to Magyar Hírlap. What's interesting about his remarks is that he is a mayor of a small town with 9000 inhabitants - if such a small fry can afford to speak out of party line in Fidesz's national media, that is news.

As for the possible causes of the defeat he mentioned communication issues within Fidesz. He stated that Fidesz has lost touch with the Hungarian youth, but he had only stale ideas that made even Fidelitas' misshapen campaign look hip. He suggested info points where government can talk to youth and vice versa.

He also mentions economic challenges ahead, echoing Orbán, who has been incessantly talking about the coming economic crisis since his election triumph in 2018. Répás also gives his view on youth, lamenting that they no longer vote for the same party for life, that party identities no longer run in families throughout generations – giving away just how identitarian gang politics have become. His complaints are echoed by other Fidesz politicians talking about youth. Without an ethnic identity, they complain, youth might even dare to vote against their government, even though said government helpfully calls itself national.

There have also been a range of Fidesz mayors who talked to various papers anonymously. Their complaints about Fidesz' campaign are a revealing insight into the absurd and bizarre nature of Fidesz. Many mayors have complained, for instance, about the top-down, centrally orchestrated campaign, with the simplistic message that the opposition is unfit.<sup>ix</sup> They all received a team from Budapest, the Fidesz HQ, who told them what to do, even if they protested. And local Fidesz and mayors even had to pay for the advice. Not only were internally used polls way out of ballpark, their messages often didn't sit well with locals. As a result, at least one local mayor decided to pay the advisers to *go home* – and ran his own campaigns instead and was reelected. István Tarlós, the previous, Fidesz-backed mayor of Budapest told Index.hu in an interview in November that he should not have allowed other people to run his campaign, referring to the Fidesz HQ's campaign team. The main news here is that a Fidesz-backed politician talked to independent media. (For contrast, Budapest's newly elected mayor has not been invited to the taxpayer-funded public media yet, three months after his taking office. Their policy of never letting an opposition politician on camera stands strong.)

From the words of these complaining mayors it appears that the urban-rural rift has been created within Fidesz. The new generation of young and hungry Fidesz soldiers appear to have internalized a more urban approach, possibly due to their fast affluence, Western education and youthful dynamism. Being out of touch with local issues may be their affliction that transferred all the way up in the party. Local mayors lament that they have been sidelined within Fidesz and only the parliamentary fraction gets any attention. Fidesz strongmen are the leaders of election districts, not mayors, and they tend to run for parliament. The complaint that crucial or negative information is withheld from Orbán on purpose, probably because no one wants to bear the bad news, has been recurring.

János Lázár, former deputy PM and Orbán's right hand minister has been sidelined after his district, Hódmezővásárhely, produced the shocking by-election defeat for Fidesz in 2018. But after the local elections in 2019, Lázár gave a number of interviews criticizing Orbán – partly posturing as a better politician more in tune with the people (even mentioning education and healthcare as things that need to improve, a startling thing) and partly in direct criticism. Lázár went so far as saying Fidesz "is no longer working with reality." He even said the unimaginable, that Fidesz has no more than a 50-50 chance at winning in 2022.

He was not the only one.

## Heads rolling

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It took until Christmas for any news about Fidesz' internal developments to emerge, and the rumors were dumped just before Christmas Eve. On December 23, however, a few important developments have been reported.

One of them is that heads might be rolling in Orbán's top communication team. The confusion surrounding the 2018 "slave law" protests (and possibly the fact that the protests could happen), the communication chaos regarding the sex tape mayor and the eventual defeat in October appear to have weakened the standing of Antal Rogán, Orbán's cabinet minister who assumed the top communication post in 2018 from Árpád Habony. The latter is reported to be recalled from London, where he had been busy setting up Orbán's Eastern European news channel.<sup>x</sup>

15-20 election Fidesz district heads are also expected to be removed.<sup>xi</sup> Fidesz's organization is based on the whimsically gerrymandered electoral districts that do not overlap with local municipalities – hence (partially) the sidelining of the local mayors. The heads of districts are also Fidesz' candidates for the parliament, and thus invariably MPs. They are also responsible for the municipal election results. It is their job to keep voters incensed and to mobilize.

Those who have fared worse than their party did in their district might find themselves out of favor. And with an all-opposition opponent in 2022, an absolute majority (50%+1) might be necessary to win – and Fidesz had that in less than half of the districts (47 out of 106) in 2018. Of course, if Fidesz can keep up the splintering of the opposition and finds all kinds of candidates to create a crowded ballot sheet once again, somewhat less than 50% might suffice, but 47-48% looks still necessary. And that may provide the basis for the firing decisions – as well as the personal sympathies of Orbán, who makes the decisions single-handedly as Fidesz president.

Personnel changes are needed according to Fidesz' internal conclusions, but the question remains, what will suffice – and whether there is an alternative elite to choose from. Orbán has already said that ministers will not be dismissed, especially not due to pressure from the public, which he called a "Western European practice". Instead, he claimed to talk things through with his ministers, to give them goals and time to correct their mistakes because "stability in governance is of great value".

Orbán has ordered all district heads for rapport in January. The question is, surprisingly, whether he will have enough cadres to replace all who disappointed him. In the district of

Dunaújváros, for instance, a parliamentary by-election is taking place on 16 February 2020, but Fidesz couldn't find a candidate of their own and support an independent candidate instead. The seat of an opposition MP is up for grab as he became mayor of the town, and Orbán would love to have a more comfortable margin to protect his two-third supermajority (without which he proved to be a lame duck between 2015-18) but his party couldn't even deliver a candidate, let alone a winning one. If the Fidesz-supported independent MP wins and later decides to join Fidesz in parliament, he will run into the very rules that Fidesz devised after the October defeat to keep the opposition from uniting: that independent MPs are not allowed to join any party once inside parliament.

## Purges in Fidesz?

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Orbán seems to have embarked upon a quest to quell the corruption that is inherent in his system of hand-picked oligarchs. The purge started before the October election defeat, it is tiny and only reached inconsequential characters – but it looks more risky now.

In an autocratic system and anti-corruption drive generally serves as a message to the soldiers telling them that they, too, can be removed and have no control over it. It is never about the placation of the public opinion, even if it accidentally also serves that purpose. In fact, an autocrat might want to hold back on open anti-corruption measures, lest the public gets the idea that public opinion matters. The public opinion in an autocratic regime needs to be managed and influenced from the top down – not placated and vindicated.

A couple of months ago two Fidesz local strongmen got into the limelight because the prosecution, inexplicably, decided to move against them. Speculation started why it was allowed. Where authorities are perceived following orders rather than the law, legal action against politically connected strongmen appears like an internal issue within the party, rather than the regular course of the law. It looks like the license to hunt them down has been issued, and people wonder why. Is it a message within the Fidesz camp reminding them that their positions are at the mercy of the king – or is it a message to the public? Is the regime behaving alongside the logic of a democracy where public opinion matters – or an autocracy where competing gangs within the ruling party have conducted an assassination against each other? And most importantly – is it a beginning of a decline?

Orbán has been long rumored to be dissatisfied with things going on in his System of Economic Cooperation (NER for short) – the fancy name of a hand-picked, politically connected oligarchy. In particular, Orbán was said to have expressed displeasure at certain individuals taking individual incentives, creaming off more than their assigned percentage, or using their position

for extorting money on their own account. The perception that only political cover makes doing business possible created a demand for politicians to bribe. It went so far that a few years ago conmen were caught posing as middlemen for politicians – and accepted bribes in exchange for delivering a politician that can be bribed as well. When they failed to deliver, the businessman who was seeking public contracts this way was so disappointed, he reported them. This businessman might have been completely wrong to assume that no one can win a contract without bribing a politician – but the sentiment exists nonetheless.

But Fidesz politicians are reluctant to admit low-level corruption. And high-level corruption, too, but for a different reason. The only name that keeps emerging is the biggest fish, Orbán's top oligarch who made it onto the global Forbes list in just a few years. If one has to be blamed for people believing that there is corruption in public procurement, Fidesz politicians tend to blame him.

But as the above mentioned anonymous dissenters said, people now feel the arrogance. And this kind of arrogance cannot come from a fellow man who is in the same financial league. It comes from those who have just recently become powerful. Locals tend to know who owns the manor and who got how much – and can nurse their resentment even if they keep quiet and vote Fidesz. Indeed, when the sex tape mayor's deals were revealed on the whistleblower site, commenters were quick to pile on and add the exact details of the corrupt deals. Dates and names and amounts. Turns out, it was even published and documented by an economic weekly, years ago when it happened, but people swallowed it and chose to vote for him nonetheless.

The two cases of corruption crackdown on Fidesz small fry might just be poor timing. Before the election, when Orbán felt confident about his triumph and was looking forward to 2030, it seemed like a time to create a precedent for the minions by making an example of the two. After the elections, when the verdicts are coming out, news about former Fidesz strongmen going to jail are really unfortunate for Fidesz. It may arouse political appetite for more by telling people that it is possible to get a corrupt politician prosecuted.

In all likelihood, the purges will stop at these two – unless there are real divisions within Fidesz and the members of NER start using the courts against each other. But that would go against Orbán's vision of Fidesz. He had often proudly bragged that only the liberals squabble between each other. Nationalists show a united front and close ranks, no matter what. And that is supposed to be a reason to vote for him, not to shun his party because they admittedly put party loyalty and power hunger before reality and law.

## Challenges before Fidesz

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In the weeks before the October elections Orbán visited swing cities, took a photo with their Fidesz mayoral candidates and invariably threatened said cities. He said in no uncertain terms that the opposition wants to settle tens of thousands of migrants if they win, and then he went on explaining how exactly *he* won't give any money to opposition-led towns. Don't those towns want to be part of the future? Don't they want development? Don't they want money, he asked.

During the 30-year history of democracy in Hungary, people voting at local elections always knew that they are voting for more or less money coming from the government, depending on the respective political parties. That is why local elections always helpfully take place after the general elections. This time, however, people chose not to care. They opted to vote against Orbán (it wasn't a vote *for* the ragtag assembly of non-Orbánist candidates) despite the threats.

The logic of an autocratic regime built purely on economic tools is that those who are against us, must not eat. There are direct and indirect ways of making sure of that. Starving any city that might have elected an opposition mayor was the logical thing to do after the elections – but can Orbán do it with half the major cities? Would that backfire? Would that forge an even stronger opposition coalition?

And on the contrary, if he behaves like a prime minister does to mayors – but with opposition mayors – wouldn't that alienate his followers? If he implicitly shows that opposition cities are legitimate by letting them live, by talking to them, by “doing politics” with them (as Fidesz puts it), doesn't that disengage his agitated followers who were put into a warlike state of mind? As the first reactions to defeat had shown, some believers were startled to see that opposition was allowed to take over where they won. That's apparently not what they've gleaned from Fidesz' communication. Opposition has been called traitors, enemies of the nation, gravediggers of the Hungarian ethnicity, communists, dangerous migrant-lovers – and if half of this treasonous activity is true, they should be executed, not allowed to take positions.

Can Budapest be punished? Can the cities?

The communication confusion is possibly the reason so many within Fidesz spoke to outside media. And we have learned that local Fidesz members have a poor grasp of that Orbán means when he asks for loyalty.

At the 28th party congress of Fidesz in September 2019 Orbán was still very confident about his winning – he promised a huge victory “and you deserved it” despite the EP-election results in May – and cracked jokes at the expense of the opposition losers, kicking downward and thus failing to do humor in true authoritarian fashion.

His most startling remark was regarding loyalism. Citing Ronald Reagan, he went into a long rant and called loyalism the 11<sup>th</sup> commandment of politics, emphasizing that it is easy (which is to speak not needed) to stay loyal when things are going swimmingly and the leader is right, but it becomes necessary exactly when things are going down. Loyalism is what is needed in politics today – by which he meant that that is what *he* needs today. He doesn’t just want support because he is right and his followers agree with him. “This is why we are on top and the liberal left that always betray each other are down.”<sup>xii</sup>

With hindsight, he must have seen the sex tape mayor’s scandal coming and it was a reminder. But it is also surprising, just how weak the understanding within the ranks of Fidesz was as to what was expected of them. The moment Fidesz’s election juggernaut hit a speed bump, the first time since 2006, Orbánists were quick to speak out and complain and many have written off their chances in 2022. Reinstating discipline and put the fear of Orbán back into them will be a major task for Orbán – because without that his rule is shaky. It has been increasingly built on the myth of invincibility and the intimidation of power. When those immaterial pillars of power are gone, when fear is gone, there will be no love to take their place.

Indeed, Gábor Török, a political analyst decoded the mood within Fidesz’ ranks after the elections in an interview, saying “Loyalty in politics only lasts as long as it makes sense.”<sup>xiii</sup> That’s not what Orbán was asking for. Török has also said the unthinkable, that Orbán might not be the Sun and Stars of Hungarian politics in a few years’ time. These are dangerous words for an autocrat. The question is whether he can still work as a politician and maneuver himself back into the unquestioned territory – even with his two-third supermajority for now. And can he do that with a party behind him where many have already given up 2022 in head?

Can he retain the war psychosis in his core supporters – while also “doing politics” with the demonized opposition? Can he find a campaign message as absolute and demonically perfect as migrant-bashing was? He has been doing it since 2015, it reached its lowest pits in 2018 – it has become tired by now.

There is an obvious need to change – but is it even possible? Political themes like migrant-bashing or climate change may be powerful, but Orbán’s regime is built around his person. If that takes a hit, no amount of warmongering may work.

Can he heal the urban-rural rift within Fidesz? Can he restore his channels that carry information upwards as well as commands from the top down? Does he really want to – or is he too tired and impatient to do politics again?

The most potent tool would be a change in government. Individual members of government are weightless and mere executioners, but they are also the highest level of sacrificial material that may signal a desire to change by Orbán (actual improvement appears to be out of question). But Orbán has already dismissed that idea – and not because of personal love for any of his weightless executioners. It must be either a shortage of loyalists or an unwillingness to yield to public pressure, lest the public gets used to it and starts to think they politically exist. He already said that much.

The old heavyweights of Fidesz might give interviews here and there, but they are unlikely ever to come back. Shunned to Brussels or the provinces for proving to be too ambitious and posing a risk to challenge to Orbán one day – they appear to stay have-beens for now.

Orbán and Fidesz always talk about “the 2002 shock”, when they were not reelected at the general elections, despite doing well (in their view) on government. Orbán calls being in opposition a very bad state of mind, from which there might be no coming back. His men keep repeating this sentiment (and the soundbite) giving us an alarming insight into what exactly they mean opposition is or does.

Fidesz appears to have a very weak internal split between those who wish to stay in EPP and those who let it go – but whatever the decision on that one, they will all accept. Leaving the brand only makes sense if the brand is on fire, or if they can see their access to resources better secured elsewhere.

## Will politics return? Will governance? Will compromise?

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On February 28, 2019, the local Fidesz representatives of Szombathely locked themselves in the council meeting room in panic, blocking the door with a potted plant, because they had lost their majority in the town council. According to the live feed on nyugat.hu, a local newspaper, they have been waiting for their district head, a Fidesz MP, to arrive from Budapest to tell them what to do.

They have been taken by surprise by the opposition majority – and they have apparently lost their compass as to what to do if those opposition people will somehow get back to power. In their minds Fidesz’ rule was infinite and falling back out of power unimaginable – possibly a

result of the much-discussed arrogance within Fidesz. They were also scared of reprimand if they just allow proceedings to go ahead. They needed permission to proceed from above. Eventually Fidesz yielded and let the opposition in – but the incident tells you about the mental state of Hungarian politics before October 2019.

It wasn't the first time Fidesz councilors refused to play democracy, nor was it the last.

The oddest and most menacing immediate reaction to the local election defeat came from the Fidesz fraction of Baja. They were offered to give the new deputy mayor in a conciliatory gesture from the winners, but they angrily refused, as if they had been offended. They published a statement that said they refuse to participate in the division of positions based on politics.

“Fidesz says no to political give and take. Fidesz in Baja doesn't wish to participate in the public division of political positions, in party politics.” (Facebook of Fidesz Baja)<sup>xiv</sup>

“Not wanting to participate in party politics” in this context means refusing to accept that more than one party can be allowed to exist and they maybe even have to compromise. After all, “those who are not with us are the enemy/don't exist” is an essential Fidesz mantra. A typical outburst that describes this state of mind: We won't do politics with you again.

Orbán wasn't this blunt. In his first reaction to the election results he menacingly promised to *accept the decision* of Budapest citizens who have elected a non-Orbánist mayor and to cooperate with him. It is not what he was telling before the election, but his lack of a new strategy in the face of a surprise result is understandable. He was biding his time.

The coming months will show whether Orbán cracks down in revenge or chooses to hit a more conciliatory tone with opposition cities. But neither one is a good option for an autocrat, who built his reign on the futility of dissent.

His immediate reaction was the appearance of compromise. He declared a (quite menacing) *100 day patience period* for Budapest. Partly because he needed time to rearrange his party – partly because he didn't want to do anything to upset the EPP and Brussels in the face of the upcoming decisions.

A political unicorn has appeared in Hungarian politics again: compromise.

Orbán sat down with the new mayor of Budapest and they both appeared to have compromised. The new mayor had to let go of his stadium-stop election slogan while Orbán

only retreated on his threat to consider all deals between Budapest and the government to be off the table, starving Budapest of all development money. He will not necessarily keep that one. The new mayor agreed to a new monster stadium in south Pest and not to veto the world athletic championship to be organized in Budapest. Since Orbán has an obsession for sports event, especially hosting them, it pleased Orbán.

But Orbán's funding promise is unlikely to be honest. At the very least he can execute it in a way that communicates generosity but means effective stop to funding. Or it may be even worse.

This looks like a balancing act for Orbán. If people start to matter, especially opposition people, if Orbán has to re-start dialogue with opposition entities, they will suddenly exist again politically. And that would be very difficult to sell to his hinterland, Fidesz voters who have genuinely internalized the line of thinking that equates "those who are against us" with the enemy. Traitors. Unthinkable threat to the nation. To our survival. Giving them the resources to live would be equivalent to feeding the traitor, feeding the enemy.<sup>4</sup>

And if we know anything about an autocracy, it is this: The moment the strongman is forced to make concessions, the moment he starts making gestures and yield to public will, the cracks on his system will widen into massive leaks and the dams holding back change crumble.

And the same thing happens if he cracks down on every "traitor" city and starves them of resources for the next five years. The opposition no longer considers itself illegitimate and unable to defeat Orbán's regime. And people won't swallow that easily if Orbán punishes 3.5 million (out of 9.7) citizens who happen to live in opposition-led cities.

One of Orbán's lesser known (abroad) moves was to cut back on local autonomy at the early stages of this reign. It is also perhaps relevant that local autonomy – as well as the environment – had been focal points of the opposition movement against the pre-1989 autocratic regime. Local autonomy, no matter how poorly executed has been viewed as a cornerstone of not letting oppression happen again. Until Orbán started cracking down on it, both financially, taking away tax revenues – and legally through his all-encompassing centralization. Cities and towns can't keep any income tax revenue, for instance, they have to ask the government every time they need to cover a pothole. And when they ask, their election results will be rubbed in

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<sup>4</sup> In the campaign running up to this election the press was shocked to find that there were a handful of places where candidates actually debated. They don't do that anymore, they don't even debate with the opposition, lest they legitimize them.

their face. When Orbán told cities that *he* won't give any money if they vote wrong, he meant it and they knew he did.

Centralization of resources was one of the first thing Orbán did after 2010– and nothing stops him from doing it again. Mayors have much less room for maneuver under Orbán's regime than they had before – and Orbán can tighten the grip even further with his parliamentary supermajority and a subservient constitutional court that would never thwart him. And that is before EU-money, Eastern Europe's most toxic cursed resource, is taken into account. Can cities circumvent Orbán's grip on the distribution of the EU development funds? It is also possible that the anticipated next economic downturn will render Orbán's dilemma moot. When Orbán has to tighten the belt the lesser cronies are bound to suffer a cut – and so do opposition cities, whether Orbán wants it or not. A recession would look like economic revenge, even if cuts were a necessity.

It appears that the unicorn turned out to be a mythical animal, after all, and Orbán's intention to compromise was indeed faked.

According to press information, the money-for-stadium deal has already been kicked.<sup>xv</sup> An internal memo of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology leaked to the press contains the proposed distribution of EU development funds between 2021-27 – and nothing is earmarked for Budapest or major cities – with the exception of very pro-Fidesz Debrecen. It assigns money to crony-infested regions instead, where oligarchs have massive interests in the tourism sector.

## Challenges ahead of the opposition

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For the first time in years, the opposition needs to be discussed when it comes to Hungarian politics. Not because they have become competent, but because they are back in the game.

Before the 2019 local elections they have been completely off the political map due to the combination of being fragmented, underfunded, and their own incompetence in formulating messages – other than reacting to Orbán. Indeed, the mantra was that those who are not OfFidesz do not even exist – and the opposition illustrated that mantra splendidly.

The fact that they are back in the game is huge and it necessitates the analysis of opposition parties – but it does not mean that they are any more competent than they were before. All they have proven in 2019 was that they could unify and finally tackle *one* of the barriers erected by Fidesz, namely an election system that only allows two parties to compete with a chance to win. A fragmented opposition never stood a chance, but a rainbow coalition born out of

hopelessness is not necessarily viable either – and it is bad news for those who believe in ideology.

It also does not mean that opposition parties finally have something to say. Much of their votes come from protest against Orbán's way of owning the country – not from any sort of sympathy for them.

In 2022 the pressure on them to build coalitions will be enormous. And so will be the pressure against it. For one thing, they are not completely chanceless anymore – there are juicy seats awaiting the starving – and that will make coalition building that much more difficult.

They can also be thwarted if Orbán does not make any more mistakes. Weirdly enough, Orbán's mistakes, his complacency and hubris, his anger and petty revenge, his personal weaknesses have always been the biggest boon for his opposition.

Naturally, the usual political obstacles will be thrown at them. Every opposition party in every district will be approached to run independently. Random people will find it in themselves to run for their fraction of a percentage of accidental votes. Fake parties built into the election law by offering generous funding for those who deliver enough nominating signatures will also be running. They have always got away without any legal consequence. The opposition parties that are lagging behind and on the brink of extinction will also be eager for running – for a little encouragement. And with no more elections until 2022, their respective weights will also be a question during negotiations – especially with polls being so unreliable.

Possibly the greatest challenge facing the joint opposition will be the need to nominate a shared candidate for prime minister. In the local elections they could get away without it, but in 2022 ambitions will clash, and the clash will be deepened by Fidesz.

A clash between the “old” and “new” opposition can also be expected. If nothing else, old comrades are more accustomed to *the way things have always been*, most importantly things that are actually corruption – and still viewed as such by the new, younger parties.

Everyone wonders how the liberals, the greens and the left will feel about voting together with Jobbik, the extreme right nationalist party, the one that used to be even further right than Orbán – until Orbán occupied their platform and was embraced as the poster boy of identitarianism in Europe, simply because he was on government and Jobbik wasn't. In 2022 Orbán might embrace Jobbik – or a part of it that is willing to walk into the embrace – as a coalition partner, just to avoid them going to the opposition. He had already made remarks to

the Austrian chancellor about the merits of such a coalition. Some part of Jobbik will be repulsed (those running under the anti-corruption, anti-establishment platform), but members of Jobbik have proven to be amenable to Orbán's interests before. That way Orbán can take a bite out of the joint coalition's votes – but it may also galvanize the non-Jobbik opposition.

The election rules will very likely be changed to make opposition paralyzed again. But it is not urgent for Orbán. He has until 2022 to rewrite the election law. Orbán will do that when his attention is back from Brussels.

But according to the present election rules, opposition parties cannot compete against one another in the 106 individual districts – but that allows them only three national party lists, because a minimum of 27 individual candidates are required in order for a party to get a national list. And even those three party lists would mean a financial setback in their funding – even with today's rules. With all the money and media at Fidesz' disposal and the audit office on their case, opposition parties will be financially very tight.

Fidesz identified independent candidates as the opposition's miracle weapon. In districts where animosity between opposition parties was too much, they could sometimes still agree to stand behind an independent candidate. For misguided voters who still believe that politics has anything to do with ideology, voting for an independent candidate took the sting out of the presence of an unacceptable other party in the opposition coalition.

Fidesz' legislative proposals are attacking exactly that. There have been proposals since the October defeat that were meant to prevent the very same thing from happening again. Think tanks, communicators, opinionators have been out in force with suggestions on how to block even the last chance of the opposition. But only one of those proposals was put into action for now: the parliament's new Rules of Procedure. In it the Fidesz supermajority voted in a few changes that were designed to make independent MPs toothless, and discourages running as an independent in the first place.

The new regulation stipulates that "Independent lawmakers and lawmakers who became independent cannot take part in the formation of parliamentary groups, and cannot join parliamentary groups." MPs can only stay with the party they were elected in or become independent. "If an MP quit his group or was expelled from it, they are not allowed to join another parliamentary group. This provision also applies to MPs who won their mandates as independent candidates and MPs who ran as candidates of a party but did not participate in the formation of the parliamentary group."<sup>xvi</sup> And if they were elected as independent, they will miss out on all the perks and privileges only party-branded MPs enjoy.

The above rules are completely ignorant of or indifferent to the basic rules of representative parliament, but the following one is downright petty, a case of spiteful micromanagement. All-opposition candidates running under the logos of several parties was a common practice at the 2019 municipal elections. That will become more difficult in 2022 as they will be obliged to stay under the names they ran under, no matter how long it is. The new rules will not allow parliamentary fractions to split either, so they will have to stay under their long name and under the coalition brand they would rather forget for four years. Election rules can be expected to change before 2022 – but only for the worse for the opposition.

After the events in 2019 the opposition may still relapse into irrelevance. Orbán will return to domestic affairs and crack down on the challengers once his troubles in Europe are settled. And he may very easily succeed in submitting dissenters and the whole conundrum of October 2019 may be forgotten. Even his short temper and an a vindictive crackdown may end up working in his favor inasmuch as it intimidates dissenters and reinforces deeply rooted authoritarian thinking patterns. But unless it is all completely forgotten and buried by fearful minds, Orbán's myth of invincibility will never be back.

With hindsight, the October defeat will be easy to pinpoint as the beginning of the end – if the cracks keep widening and lead to a retreat of Orbán. But they may not. The two years until the 2022 elections will decide whether Orbán enters history as the man who finally brought back autocracy to Hungary, or the man who tried but failed.

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