



OPINIONS & COMMENTS

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN THE WORLD

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MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN BUDAPEST IN THE AUTHORITARIAN ERA

dr Balázs Szabó

Abstract

In the 2010s, the Hungarian government party (Fidesz) was in power in the city government and in the district municipalities of Budapest. In principle, this political constellation could have been beneficial for the development of Budapest. However, the experiences were contradictory, and the centralization of power had negative consequences in the local decision-making. Both the responsibilities of local governments and the local election system changed in the first term, thus the Fidesz could keep the power in Budapest in 2014. In the second term, large (and contradictory) development projects started, the standard of living improved, and the Fidesz won the national elections, but thereafter lost the local elections in the capital city in 2019. The paper focuses on the main local political issues of the 2010-2019 period and on the two local elections.

The first right-wing municipality of Budapest

The Orbán regime started on April 2010, when the Fidesz won the parliamentary election. The party gained 52% of the votes and more than two-thirds of the mandates, thus it obtained constitutional majority. The opposition (practically the socialist party) won only in two of the 186 single constituencies, both belonged to the 13th district of Budapest. The Fidesz gained 46,3% of the votes in the capital, it reached lower rates only in two north-eastern counties. This was not surprising, Budapest had been the stronghold of left and liberal parties in the post-socialist decades (Kovács 1999) and even before, in the interwar period (Ignácz 2006).

The Fidesz repeated this victory in the autumn local elections. Its candidates won the mayor's seat in Budapest (53,3%) and almost in every district of the capital. They also won a majority in the district assemblies, the exception was the 13th district again. This similarity of the results is explained by the short time between the parliamentary and municipal elections. The summer is a politically inactive period; the budget debates started only in the autumn (after the elections), no wonder, then, that the government party's popularity did not decrease.

Symbolically, to gain the mayor's seat of Budapest was the most important because it happened to a right wing party for the first time after the 1989 change of regime. However, the Fidesz rule in the districts had more practical importance. Due to the two-tier system[1] in Budapest, the responsibility of the districts is higher in the city development.

The first term of the Fidesz-run municipality, 2010-2014

The first years of the 2010s belonged to the crisis period. Consequently, there were no new large projects, the city municipality focused on finishing the 4th metro line (it's construction began in 2004), and finally did it in 2014, a month before the next national election. Only one large project started in 2011: the renovation of an old building (Várkert bazár) which was a part of renewing the Castle district. 75% of the original costs of the Várkert renovation were financed from EU-support (the price doubled by the end of the project). The similarity with the metro-project is the deadline: the first celebration of finishing the project was held days before the parliamentary election in 2014. (In reality, completing the project needed two more years and there were two more opening ceremonies).[2]

The local self-governance faced essential changes in Hungary in the early 2010s. A newly established central institution (KLIK) took over all public schools in the country in 2013; the municipalities lost their role in the education.[3] Something similar happened to the local hospitals in 2011, so the main functions of the municipalities almost disappeared. They lost the education-related part of their budget and also the right to nominate directors, to decide about the extension or closure of schools, which was very important in towns and also painful in Budapest where originally the districts had this responsibility.

The Budapest municipality remained in power in the cultural sphere; the city was the owner of the 10 main theatres, the circus, and the zoo. The municipality closed two of its theatres in the first years (2011 Merlin, 2012 Budapest Kamaraszínház) and started to politically occupy cultural institutions. It broke with the previous practice of letting professional committees vote about the new director of theatres, and nominated an actor as the director of Új Színház. (This person had strong connection with the leader of a far right party, but not any skills in management.) This decision induced street protest and debates in the cultural sphere. These were not successful, but probably had some impact on the outcome of the next attempt of the mayor: the nomination of a new director of Trafó House of Contemporary Arts had to be withdrawn due to the resistance of professionals in 2012.

Next to the attacks against traditional cultural institutions, the politically motivated changes reached the alternative culture, mainly located in public buildings. The closure of Sirály in 2012 had direct political reasons: some anti-governmental protesters had meetings there. Thus the 6th district municipality closed the building, pretending that it was not safe because of statics problems. After the closure, the staff and programs moved to Roham bár but after a few days the owner closed the place (supposedly under the pressure of the 8th district municipality).[4] Other alternative institutions were also closed (Tűzraktér in 2011) or displaced (Gödör in 2012), officially not for political but financial reasons.

[1] Both the districts and Budapest have elected assembly and mayor (since 1994 the mayors have been directly elected) and they have the same degree of autonomy - similarly to Warsaw. The town hall of Budapest has no right to control the activity of districts (demolition and construction of buildings, maintenance of roads, parks, etc.), its responsibility is limited to the issues concerning the city as a whole (like public transport) and to the maintenance of some primary areas (bridges, main roads, etc.).

[2] <https://atlatzso.hu/kozpenz/2016/08/29/tobbszori-atadas-megduplazodo-koltsegek-igy-ujult-meg-a-varkert-bazar-az-unio-penezbol/>

[3] <https://oktatas.atlatzso.hu/2021/03/31/ut-a-kozoktatas-teljes-centralizacioja-fele-a-klik-rovid-tortenete-2010-tol-napjainkig/>

[4] http://nol.hu/belfold/rohamtempoban_zartak_be_az_uj_siralyt-1385327

The main “battles” of the cultural war of Fidesz were located in Budapest but the city government played only a marginal role in them: the town hall gave the permission for the new statues, buildings, tree cuttings, and everything the governmental authorities requested.

An outstanding example of the symbolic policy of Fidesz is the change of the main square of Budapest (Kossuth tér). One of the first steps of its reconstruction was the displacement of statues in 2012, which fits the declared objective of the project, the restoration of the square as it was before 1944 (Erőss 2016). The result is four old-new statues (copies of the original ones) at the price of cutting 200 trees and decreasing green areas in the densely built city centre. From 2012, the Parliament became the controlling authority of the area, so the municipality had no word in one of the largest reconstruction programs carried out in its territory.[5] The next step of symbolic appropriation of public spaces was the erection of a new statue right after the 2014 parliamentary election: the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation. The intention behind was absolving Hungary of its responsibility for the Holocaust through depicting it as a victim of Nazi Germany. This highly controversial message provoked a series of protests which culminated in the creation of a counter-memorial consisting of remaining personal belongings of survivors (Mikecz 2021).

Another type of symbolic acts was the renaming of 59 streets and squares in Budapest in 2011, [6] officially with the aim of decommunization. However, a few non-communist, neutral names (like Republic square or Roosevelt square) were also changed. The renaming of Moscow square resulted in an international conflict: the Russian ambassador expressed his astonishment about the decision. The mayor immediately promised to find another public place to be named after Moscow[7] but it happened only after 5 years of strengthening the Russian-Hungarian financial cooperation and developing ideological similarities. The vice-mayor of Budapest, together with his Russian counterpart inaugurated the Moscow esplanade in a development area of a governmental project in 2016.[8]

After the first years of culture war, the Fidesz tried to push the mayor, István Tarlós to a neutral-technocratic role, similar to the one played by Sobyanin in Moscow (Büdenbender – Zupan 2017). The decreasing responsibilities of the municipality made this change feasible. Budapest lost a large part of its institutions, so the dissatisfaction about schools and hospitals did not translate into disappointment with the mayor, and he had to focus on large projects (in some cases initiated by the government) and on managing the public transport. While the mayor of Budapest had no strong position in the Fidesz, 13 of the district mayors were also members of the Parliament in the 2010-2014 term. The mayor had no own successful initiatives, he could only veto some decisions.

In the spring of 2014, the Fidesz gained the two-thirds of mandates again, but only with 44% of the votes. This was, at least partly, an outcome of the new election system.[1] The disappointed opposition was also defeated in the European Parliamentary elections in June (record low turnout, and the Fidesz received 50% of the votes), which hampered the preparation for the municipal elections held in October 2014.

The municipal election system in Budapest remained more or less the same in the 1990-2010 period. The only important change occurred in 1994 when the direct election of the mayor of Budapest was established (in 1990 the General Assembly elected the mayor). In 2010, the new government halved the number of General Assembly (GA) members, but the really important changes in the local election system entered into force in the next term (from 2014): the length of the term was risen to 5 years; the composition of the GA of Budapest also changed.

[5] <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2013/05/06/kossuth-ter-fakivagas-brfk-ugyeszseg-vedegylet/>

[6] https://hungarysgotdata.blog.hu/2015/12/06/a_nagy_atnevezes

[7] https://hvg.hu/itthon/20161031_tarlos_elmagyarazta_moszkva_fopolgarmesterenek_a_moszkva_ter_atnevezeset

[8] <https://24.hu/belfold/2017/11/21/atadtak-a-moszkva-setanyt/>

[9] In the new system, half of the mandates can be gained in single constituencies, and the formerly two-round election has been transformed into a single-round one. So the relative majority of a party is likely to translate into a disproportionately large number of mandates (Kovács – Viđa 2015).

Originally, the 66 GA members were elected directly from party lists, from 2014 the 23 district mayors automatically became GA members and only 9 members received their mandate from the compensation lists (and the city mayor was also member of GA). So the district mayors constituted the majority in the Budapest leadership. The election of district mayors and members of district assemblies did not change, both were directly elected. The border (and number) of district constituencies changed in every election, which was a good opportunity for gerrymandering.

While earlier the mayors and members of GA could be also members of the Parliament, from 2014 the two positions became mutually exclusive, thus the power of local representatives significantly decreased.

Municipal election in 2014

After the defeat at the parliamentary elections, the left-liberal political forces tried to remain united, but the greens and liberals did not join them. Thus only the leftist and the centrist parties had a common candidate, an unknown doctor without any political background and (as it turned out) skills. After his very weak campaign poorly covered by the media, he withdrew two weeks before the elections, and the centrist block supported Lajos Bokros, the leader of a small non-parliamentary party (earlier minister of finance of the left-liberal coalition in the mid-1990, later EP member of a centre-right party).

Tarlós owed his victory to the disintegrated opposition. Since the Fidesz and the mainstream opposition had equal support in the parliamentary election in spring, a united opposition would have had some chance in October if it had led a really efficient campaign. This chance was already lost in summer when some opposition parties opted for competition instead of joining the cooperation and running a common candidate against Tarlós. The consequences of this decision were immediately visible in the opinion polls[1] and later on in the election results (Table 1), as well.

Table 1: Results of mayoral election in 2014

candidate	party	votes	%
Tarlós I.	Fidesz	290 675	49,1
Bokros L.	MOMA-DK-Együtt-PM-MSZP	213 550	36
Staudt G.	Jobbik	42 093	7,1
Csárdi A.	LMP	33 689	5,7
Bodnár Z.	MLP	12 461	2,1

source: <https://www.valasztas.hu/home>

The results of the municipal elections were very similar to those of the parliamentary election, though the turnout was lower, only 43%. The Fidesz candidates gained the most votes, but their share was only 43%, the opposition alliance received 36%. The two oppositional parties, the greens (LMP: 7,3%) and the far-right (Jobbik: 8,9%) which did not join the alliance had marginal roles in this system, they only gained GA seats in the compensation lists.

The Fidesz gained 17 of the 23 district mayor positions (Figure 1a). Due to the single majoritarian system, they could win with less than 50% of the votes. This actually happened in 8 districts (in some of them they won with less than 45% of the votes). The low turnout also helped the Fidesz. It was the third election within half a year; the voters of the opposition were disappointed, so in most cases the support of 25% of the population was enough to gain the mayoral position. The share of Fidesz voters was slightly higher (26-28% of the population) only in the stronghold of the right-wing parties.

[10] https://hvg.hu/itthon/20141002_Median_Falus_magasan_verte_volna_Bokrost.

The Fidesz gained 73% of the mandates in the districts with 43% of the votes (Figure 1b). This part of the local election system did not change, the result was the consequence of the so called Central arena of power[11] (Bozóki 2012); it meant that the Fidesz could win in the presence of leftist and radical right political forces because these latter were not likely to cooperate. 217 of the 293 district assembly mandates were gained by the Fidesz, but it won with more than half of the votes in less than 30% of the single constituencies. Even a below-average (43%) support was enough to gain the mandate in 43 cases, due to the disintegrated opposition. The far-right Jobbik was generally weak in Budapest, the green-party LMP lost a large part of its earlier voters. They received 9 and 7% of the votes, respectively, and they had candidates in almost every constituencies. They could not win in any of them but prevented other oppositional candidates from winning.

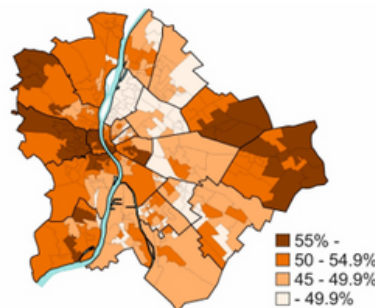
Figure 1: Results of municipal elections: winners of the election of district mayors (a) and district assembly members in single constituencies (b) in 2014



There was only one district with total oppositional victory, the 13th district, where the Fidesz gained only 18-28% of the votes. This stronghold of the opposition had the same mayor from 1994 (member of the socialist party), who managed the transformation of the industrial district to a post-industrial one. The emergence of office centres and new residential parks changed the social profile of the district originally divided into two different parts, an inner city modernist quarter, which is the home of the liberal intelligentsia, and a much larger part called Angyalföld, which consists of pre-war working class areas and socialist housing estates – both a traditional voter base of the MSZP (Hungarian Socialist party). The district’s social composition changed a lot during the last decades but, interestingly enough, the political behaviour of its inhabitants remained stable: they invariably voted for the opposition of the Fidesz.

The traditional right-wing areas did not change, the mayoral election results showed the traditional spatial differences: Tarlós gained the most votes (50-67%) in the Buda side and CBD (central business district), both the home of upper middle class, and also in the eastern districts which are low-rise suburban areas with middle class population (Figure 2). In 2014, the Fidesz (as the populist parties usually do) attracted an increasing part of lower class population, thus it had good results in the 8th district.

Figure 2: Share of votes for Tarlós in the single constituencies in 2014



[11] The term was invented by Orbán, and frequently used in the Hungarian public speech in the first half of the 2010s

The Fidesz could start its 2nd term with a significant majority in the GA of Budapest and in 15 district assemblies, while in two other districts it had as many representatives as the opposition.

The 2nd term of Tarlós and the Fidesz

After the municipal elections in October, the street protests intensified. The largest one was organized against a new tax on the use of internet in November. The size of the march attracted international attention (demonstration in Budapest was on the cover of the New York Times International)[12] and the government withdrew. New movements also started in the same year. The most important of them was a green movement against a new government project, the construction of a museum district in the city park (Városliget). The project included the demolition of an old building and the reconstruction of another one, the construction of four new, very large buildings, and the cutting of many old trees.[13] Budapest is a densely built city where the green areas in the inner parts are missing, but there is a wide brownfield zone that could be an ideal location for new museums. The protesters, professionals and the opposition wanted to change the venue of the museum district; a group of protesters moved to the city park in order to protect the trees and lived in tents for months, without any success. Though it seemed a typical urban issue, the municipality did not have any influence on the decision made by the government, the project was led by a state-established company.

After the municipality had lost some of its essential functions, the management of large-scale projects was its main task. Cooperation with investors is not rare in the post-socialist urban governance (Enyedi 1998), but in this period it became dominant. From 2013, the local government did not receive any part of the personal income taxes, so it had to turn to private investors for funding. The crucial role of private capital in development projects resulted in conflicts with the green NGOs. The municipality was labelled as tree cutting urban government, and the new public square renovations strengthened this image: the green surface decreased in most cases, a larger and larger part of it was replaced by stone pavement.[14]

In Budapest, the street protests became part of the everyday life, most of them were anti-governmental demonstrations, so the image of Budapest as an oppositional city strengthened. The address of the protest movements was the government mainly because the city and district governments did not have much influence on the political decisions though they belonged to the same political group of Fidesz. The mayor of Budapest could not keep his quasi-independent status (he frequently said in his former interviews that he was supported by the Fidesz, but was not a member of the party). Of course there was no difference between the city leaders and the government officials in their political attitude; the sustainable development and the green-minded progressive urban governance were not a part of their priorities.

Housing issues

The share of public housing in Budapest (as in other post-socialist cities) is very limited, only 5% of the housing stock the mass privatisation of the 1990s ended around 2000 (Tosics et al 2003). Since then, the remaining public housing sector has been slowly decreasing; the number of dwellings has halved by now. A large part of the public housing is concentrated in the inner city districts; most of these dwellings are located in old buildings (Kovács et al 2015). The aim of several districts was the privatisation, and in some cases the process was accompanied by corruption.[15] Between 2010 and 2019, 10% of the public housing stock became privatised, but this share reached 19-25% in some districts, while the construction of new public dwellings was rare. The declared reason of privatisation was the demand of tenants; decision makers cited surveys showing that “people” preferred to be owner occupants.

[12] <https://444.hu/2014/10/30/a-new-york-times-nemzetkozi-kiadasanak-oktober-30-i-cimlapja>

[13] https://hvg.hu/itthon/20160317_varosliget_fakivagas

[14] <https://24.hu/belfold/2016/09/24/a-fakivagasok-ellen-tuntettek-budapesten/>

[15] <https://atlatzso.hu/kozpenz/2016/05/20/berlakasbiznisz-a-vii-keruletben-szazmillios-kar-erhetten-az-onkormanyzatot/>

Since the housing prices started to increase in 2014, and this growth was above average in the inner city districts, it is not surprising that the tenants (or other actors behind the tenants) preferred buying. The privatisation was especially intensive in two very different inner city districts: the 5th, which is the central business district of Budapest with extremely high housing prices, and the 8th district, which is traditionally inhabited by the urban poor, but it launched large reconstruction projects (Czifrusz et al 2015). The previous became a symbol of corruption when media and investigative journalism brought to light the background stories of cheaply sold real estates.[16] The privatisation was a tool of displacement of the poor in the 8th district whose objective was to become a student city and a middle class neighbourhood.

Public transport as the main task of municipality

One year after finishing the construction of the 4th metro line, the renovation works of the 3rd line started. The municipality decided to refurbish the rusty, outdated Soviet metro cars instead of purchasing new ones. The official explanation was the lower price but the political motivation and the intention of doing business with the original producer were easily detectable. The decision fit the foreign policy doctrine called “Eastern Opening” and the improving relationships between the Hungarian and Russian governments.[17] Though there had to be a public procurement, the Russian Metrowagonmash easily won because the competitors were excluded by the decision makers. There were many debates about the project that revealed the attitude of the leaders of the city.[18] The lack of air conditioners in the refurbished metro cars indicated their indifference to the problems of climate change. Similarly, the mayor claimed that the installation of lifts for the disabled during the renovation of metro stations would have been a luxury.[19]

Though the public transport remained one of the main tasks of the municipality, the metro case suggests that the decision was not made by the city leaders themselves. The reduction of their authority is also detectable in the changes of management and structure of the public transport system. The Budapest Transport Company (BKK) and every department of the municipality dealing with public transport were merged in the newly established Centre for Budapest Transport (headed by a relative of the prime minister) in 2010.[20] In 2016, the agglomeration bus lines and suburban train lines were taken away from BKK and given to national companies[21] but this did not solve the problem of financing public transport.

Stadiums – the symbol of the governmental infrastructure development

In 2017, the government pushed the city hall to apply for hosting the Olympic games in 2024, but a local movement against it became unexpectedly successful. The number of petition signatures (266 thousands) almost reached the number of votes the mayor of Budapest received in the elections (290 thousand), so Budapest withdrew.[22] By that time, the government had already spent 35 billion HUF for the application; some areas had also been purchased. However, Budapest could not avoid the prestige investments. After the withdrawal, the government spent billions on international sport events: Water games in 2017 (swimming pool reconstruction and extension), Handball Championship in 2022 (construction of a new Sports Hall), World Athletics Championship in 2023 (application in 2018, a new stadium under construction). The stadiums became a symbol of the Fidesz rule since large stadiums were also built in small towns not only in Budapest.

[16] <https://magyararancs.hu/belpol/kepviselo-urnak-jo-lesz-117465>

[17] <https://444.hu/2015/05/27/a-fovaros-ramondta-az-ament-a-vilag-viccere-azaz-metrofelujitasra/>

[18] <https://444.hu/2016/05/15/a-felujitott-3-as-metro-uraim-vettunk-valamit>

[19] https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2015/12/08/mozgasserult_akadalymentesites_3-as_metro_kirekesztes/

[20] <https://bkk.hu/en/about-bkk/about-us/who-are-we/>

[21] <http://nol.hu/belfold/tarlos-visszavagott-orbannak-1584457>

[22] https://nepszava.hu/1121211_olimpia-menekulne-kifele-a-nemzeti-ugybol-a-kabinet

Most of the football stadiums were reconstructed in the last decade and new sport complexes were built. These investments served the professional teams and not the inhabitants; mass sports facilities did not improve. The sport investments were generally initiated by the government, Budapest did not have an important role in the process.

Changing strategy of opposition after the 2018 defeat

Fidesz won 50% of the votes and two thirds of the mandates again at the 2018 parliamentary elections. The latter was a big defeat for the opposition because they had a chance to avoid it. If they had officially cooperated and run only one candidate in the single constituencies, they could have won in some of them where the Fidesz gained only 40-43% of the votes. This was the case in five of the 18 Budapest constituencies. The difference between the capital and the countryside increased; while in Budapest the opposition gained three quarters of the mandates, in the countryside they got only three from the 88.

After long debates, the highly divided opposition agreed on a new selection mechanism of the common candidate for the mayoral position, it was the primary election. The first round was held in February 2019. After a debate in the television between the candidate of the socialist party (MSZP) and that of a small green party (PM), the second won with 80% of the votes.[23] The number of voters was surprisingly big; in the period of apathy, 34 thousands votes could be regarded as a good result. The next round was held in June, the number of voters increased to 65 thousands, and there were two other candidates, a popular tv-personality of the left-liberal party (DK), and an unknown member a new liberal party (Momentum), finally the PM candidate, Karácsony won with 49%.[24]

The results of the European Parliamentary elections in May did not change the overall position of the opposition (the Fidesz won again with 52%), but altered the power relations between the oppositional parties, which had an impact on the negotiations about the municipal elections. As a consequence of the clash of the green party (2,1%) and the low support for the far-right Jobbik (6,1%) moving toward the center right, these parties were offered very few positions in the Budapest elections (one or two candidates for the districts assemblies, and none for the district mayors' position), and finally they accepted it. The united opposition tried to agree on common candidates for the mayoral and assembly member positions in every single constituency (successfully in 204 of the 289) and also about supporting one mayor-candidate at the Budapest level. It was a hard challenge because of the fragmented opposition (one liberal, one right wing, two leftist, and two green parties), all of them willing to have candidates with a chance of winning in 23 districts. Under these conditions, it was a good result to have 204 common candidates (only the LMP and Jobbik had other candidates in 5 districts).

Besides the united opposition and the Fidesz, two other parties also ran candidates in the election. One of them was the MH, the splinter of Jobbik, a classic racist, anti-immigrant far-right party, actually more anti-opposition than anti-government (and supported by governmental media). The other was a joke-party (MKKP), highly involved in local issues that expected good results in Budapest but did not win in any of the constituencies. These parties had only a small number of candidates (MH 42, MKKP 53) and only in some constituencies.

The election of the mayor of Budapest was in the focus of interest of both politicians and voters. Besides the two main rivals, Karácsony and Tarlós, there were two other candidates; an anti-establishment media-person, who at first received then lost the support of LMP and Jobbik because he criticised them after their failure at the EP elections, and a trash-celebrity without any political past and skills, supposedly backed by the Fidesz.

[23] <https://merce.hu/2019/02/04/az-elovalasztással-elegedett-a-masodik-fordulora-keszul-karacsony/>

[24] https://hvg.hu/itthon/20190626_Elovalasztas_Karacsony_Gergely_Kalman_Olga_DK_MSZP_KerpelFronius_Gabor

Campaign 2019

The opposition campaigned with an anti-Fidesz agenda combined with local issues. Its parties claimed that the election would be a first step to demolish the Fidesz system. They supported the aims of green movements and highlighted local social issues from public housing construction till helping the homeless people. One of their aims was to stop the governmental prestige investments like the construction of sport complexes.

The Fidesz campaign was based on character assassination; labelling Karácsony as “unsuitable” in contrast with Tarlós, the competent leader. The election was framed as a competition between the incumbent mayor and the “clowns”, a common epitheton ornans of the three other candidates in the government-dominated media.

Karácsony got the support of public figures (actors, musicians) who were important for the urban middle class and of politicians from abroad, like the newly elected mayor of Istanbul (Ekrem Imamoglu) who sent a supporting message.

On the Fidesz side, the campaign team made some mistakes. For example, the governmental media published the supporting words of Scarlett Johansson who allegedly wished the winning of Tarlós, but a rebuttal by the actress forced them to retreat on the next days.

There were examples of disrupting the rivals’ events, and there was no debate between the two main candidates (nor between the candidates for the district mayors’ position), which fit the strategy of the governmental party.

Results of the 2019 municipal election

The turnout was 51% which is 8% more than it had been at the previous municipal election but lagged behind the 75% reached at the 2018 parliamentary election (in Budapest), which is not surprising because the national elections are the most important in parliamentary systems. In addition, the lower turnout of the municipal elections is also explained by the stricter rules (those who are away from their place of residence cannot vote).

The results of the three parts of municipal elections were very similar. Hardly any voters shared their votes between governmental and oppositional candidates. More than 90% of those who voted for Tarlós voted also for Fidesz candidates in districts and constituencies. Tarlós could not attract many oppositional voters. Comparing the results with those of the 5 months earlier EP elections, where the turnout was the same, we can see that the sum of the number of Fidesz and MH voters (280 and 15 thousands, respectively) was almost the same as the number of those who voted for Tarlós (306 thousand) in the autumn (Table 2).

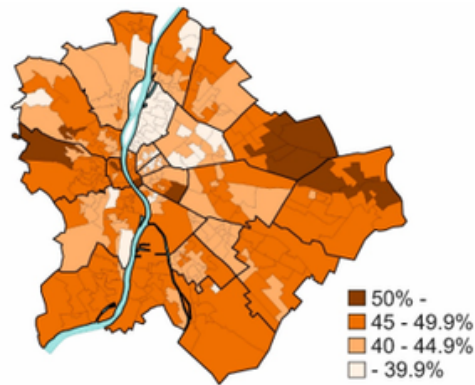
Table 2: Results of mayoral election in 2019

candidate	party	votes	%
Karácsony G.	Opposition	353 593	50,9
Tarlós I.	Fidesz	306 608	44,1
Puzsér R.	independent	30 972	4,5
Berki K.	independent	4 045	0,6

source: <https://www.valasztas.hu/home>

The Fidesz voter base changed a bit between 2014 and 2019. The government party lost the classic conservative districts in Buda (Figure 3). There was a demographic change in this upper middle class area, and consequently in its voters' political attitude. The old middle class of the Buda side had been the stronghold of right wing and far right parties from 1990 till the mid-2010s, but the emerging new generations did not follow this political behaviour. As the Fidesz became a right wing populist party, it lost the dominance in this part of the city. Only very few of the most pro-Fidesz areas are located in the Buda hills, an increasing part of them is in the industrial (old working class) districts, and in the eastern (lower middle class) suburbs. The Fidesz has a more and more aging and lower class voter base in Budapest, but a large part of the old middle class still support them (Róna et al 2020).

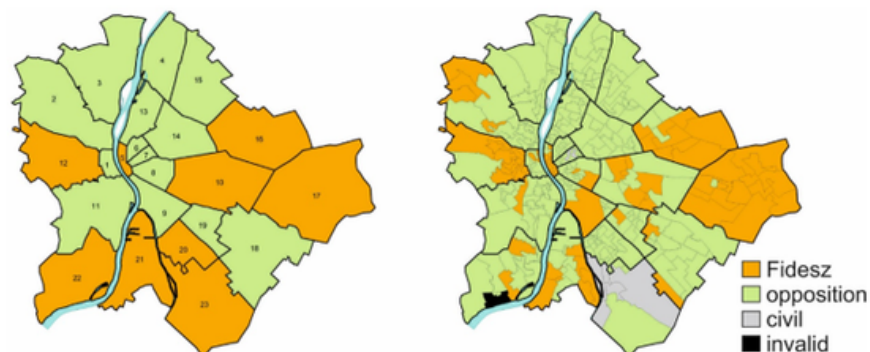
Figure 3: Share of votes for Tarlós in the single constituencies in 2019



Karácsony was the candidate of the young urbanites, so he had good results in the inner city districts but of course he gained most votes in the 13th district. He was very successful in the strongholds of the Socialist Party (MSZP backed Karácsony from the beginning). Interestingly, the lower middle class of the outskirts had similar political profile as the upper middle class in Buda hills, where the Fidesz slowly lost ground.

The maps displaying the results of the 2019 election of district mayors and district assembly members are very different from the ones prepared 5 years earlier (Figure 4). Fidesz could win in 9 districts but in 2 of them this victory was tricky. In the 20th district the same mayor won as before, he had been socialist for 20 years and joined the Fidesz only some months before the election. The 23rd district had its own local parties, and their candidate was backed by the Fidesz. The government party gained assembly majority only in 6 of these 9 districts.

Figure 4: Results of municipal elections: winners of the election of district mayors (a) and district assembly members in single constituencies (b) in 2019



The united opposition won in 212, while the Fidesz only in 68 single constituencies. This was a consequence of the majoritarian system; the actual difference between the number of votes they received was only 9%. In a hybrid regime, the opposition rarely wins elections, which makes a victory in the main cities, capitals especially important and, in some sense, symbolic. While it proved to be completely impossible in Russia or Belarus, it happened in Turkey in 2019. Though it is a worldwide phenomenon that the liberal and anti-authoritarian middle class live in urban areas, its political consequences are not the same in different regions. In the Western democratic regimes, the liberal and leftist political forces have a big advantage in cities, in the illiberal regimes this advantage is small.

Summary

The centralization tendencies of the Fidesz regime and the weakening of the democratic system were harmful for the municipalities in the 2010s. Budapest did not profit from the fact that the leadership of the capital and the country had the same political colour from 2010 till 2019. Its authority and public functions were shrinking; the city became the arena of governmental investments. The Fidesz could remain in power after the first term, but it had to do more with the disintegrated opposition than with its own popularity. The large and highly controversial investment projects that were in the focus during the second term gave birth to different social movements against the government. After the 2018 Fidesz victory in the parliamentary election, a cooperation between the opposition parties started and it proved to be successful in the 2019 local elections in Budapest.

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AUTHOR

dr Balázs Szabó - Specialist from the Geographical Institute - Research Center for Astronomy and Earth Sciences in Budapest. Research topics: Urban geography, urbanization, housing research, electoral geography. Qualifications: Urban and regional studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2002. - Master's degree, Political Science, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2003 - Master's degree, Geosciences Doctorate School, Eötvös Loránd University, 2015. - PhD. Membership and functions in Hungarian and international scientific organizations, societies: Member of the Hungarian Geographical Society since 2005.

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Fundacja Rozwoju Demokracji Lokalnej im. Jerzego Regulskiego
ul. Edwarda Jelinka 6, 01-646 Warsaw, Poland