



Signs of Change on the Hungarian Political Scene a Year Before Parliamentary Elections

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For the first time in 12 years, the ruling Fidesz and the opposition have even chances of winning the parliamentary elections in April 2022. Unification of the opposition gives it strength, however, the institutional and financial advantages of the ruling party will be difficult to overcome. The government may be weakened by the effects of the pandemic and the loss of membership in the European People's Party (EPP). The authorities aim to get funds from the new EU budget before the elections. As a partnership with the European extreme right will not contribute to this goal, the formation of a new grouping in the European Parliament (EP) by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is unlikely for now.

According to March polls, support for Fidesz and the planned joint party list of six opposition parties is similar (36% and 37%, respectively). However, by party, the ruling Fidesz is clearly leading (33%). On the opposition side, the right-wing Jobbik and the liberal-left Democratic Coalition (DK) have the most supporters at 11% each. The electoral alliance will also include the liberal Momentum (6%), the left-wing Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP, 5%), as well as the Greens-style group Politics May Be Different (LMP, 2%), and Dialogue (1%).

The Opposition's Chances. The opposition announced a joint list for the parliamentary elections in December 2020. This ended a period in which landslide victories for Fidesz were a foregone conclusion. The opposition's fragmentation guaranteed the ruling party a clear advantage after the adoption of [election laws in 2011](#) that reward the biggest political power over others. The main obstacle to cooperation among the opposition was the willingness of some parties (Jobbik, LMP, Dialogue, Momentum) to distance themselves from the groupings of former rulers (MSZP, DK) who were blamed for Fidesz's victory in 2010. Another dividing line ran between Jobbik, a party known for anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric until it reformed in 2017, and the rest of the opposition, which did not want to cooperate with the far-right. The opposition parties cooperated for the first time during the [protests against changes to labour laws](#) at the turn of 2018-2019.

This translated into political cooperation in the [local elections in 2019](#), which brought the most success for a united opposition since 2010, including wins in Budapest and 10 major cities. This made possible the elimination of the dependencies of businesses and local administration on the Fidesz government in these cities, which disrupted the general public conviction that Orbán's system was infallible. This example proved that a joint party list in 2022 and one joint candidate in all constituencies may be advantageous for the opposition. The selection of the list and candidate for prime minister will take place through primary elections this fall. This procedure—tested before voting for the mayor of Budapest—strengthens the democratic legitimacy of the candidates and therefore increases their chances of success in the elections. It is also beneficial for the opposition to announce a clear goal of changing the government, as the extremely polarised Hungarian society may treat the elections as a referendum on Fidesz. The practicality of a unified opposition is also confirmed by polls showing that 95% of supporters of at least one opposition party would also vote for a joint opposition list. Moreover, an election between just two camps is likely to increase voter activity, as a fewer of them express no political preference (currently, 27%, a year ago, 34%).

There are, however, still internal divisions within the opposition, visible already at the stage of preparations for the primaries, for example, regarding details of conducting

them and the number of candidates. The inability to overcome the differences led to the [defeat of the opposition in 2018](#). The chances of electoral success are also reduced by the fact that not all opposition parties are part of the united camp—the far-right factions of Jobbik, including Our Homeland, and the anti-system Two Tailed Dog Party could collect a total of around 3% of the votes. Also, the lack of a common programme and vision for the state may constitute another weakness that will make it difficult to convince voters of the opposition's ability to govern.

Fidesz's Chances. Exercising power and having a constitutional majority in parliament benefits Fidesz. It allows for the adoption of further amendments to the constitution or electoral laws—an amendment in November last year made it harder to issue a party list. Besides, Fidesz is the largest, best-organised and most resourced party in Hungary. This allows it to, for example, conduct mass opinion polls aimed at adjusting the government's actions to electoral preferences. [Public media and most of the media market have been completely subordinated to its interests](#). After a decade in power, the party also does not need to prove that it is capable of governing. All these factors contribute to an overall advantage for Fidesz heading into the elections.

The pandemic, though, constitutes a challenge for the government. Hungary's statistics on new COVID-19 cases and mortality are among the worst in the world, coupled with poor-quality healthcare and chaos in managing the health crisis. Although more than 30% of citizens had received at least one dose of a vaccine by mid-April—one of the best results globally—the government will have to take responsibility for any adverse effects and the potential exposure from the low effectiveness of the Russian and Chinese vaccines used in this country, none of which are approved by the EU-wide European Medicines Agency.

The pandemic-deepened recession is also working to the disadvantage of the government. According to the estimates of the European Commission, Hungary's economy shrank by 5.3% of GDP in 2020. This does not differ much from the slowdowns in other Central European countries, however, in the face of economic uncertainty, Fidesz oligarchs and politicians' lifestyles and enrichment through public funds may be perceived by voters as particularly flagrant. This could exacerbate the feeling of weariness with Fidesz after 12 years of rule. To safeguard against election failure, the party is trying to secure its influence, for example, by creating controlled, private foundations to which it transfers state property. For example, the newly established MOL-Új Európa foundation

was given a 10.48% stake in the Hungarian oil company MOL, formally for environmental and healthcare purposes.

The government is also weakened by unfavourable changes in the international environment. There was no populist turnaround in the 2019 EP elections, to which Orbán hoped to reorganise the European right. The right-wing populism he represents was also strained by the defeat of U.S. President Donald Trump. The cost came as the [exclusion of Fidesz from EPP](#) and the loss of influential partners—the German CDU and CSU—which makes it harder to pursue its interests in the EU.

Conclusions and Perspectives. For Fidesz, the stakes in the upcoming parliamentary elections may be just winning a simple majority. Faced with the threat of losing it, the party is trying to complete its takeover of the state, initiated in 2010 by changing the institutional system, filling posts with people associated with Fidesz for terms lasting several election cycles, and building the economic power of party-loyal oligarchs. Corruption remains inherent to the system, which, according to Transparency International's global Corruption Perceptions Index, increased drastically after 2012 (Hungary recorded the highest level of corruption in the EU in 2020, along with Romania and Bulgaria). Given these circumstances, only an outright constitutional majority for the opposition—unlikely given the polling—would mean the end of the Orbán system, the dismantling of which would still be very difficult.

Fidesz's break up with the European Christian Democrats and the need to conduct a brutal election campaign in the face of even polling pushes the government to radicalise its domestic and European politics. In the coming year, however, this will not translate into a partnership between Fidesz and the European far-right, as it would marginalise Hungary in the European Council. Access to funds from the new EU budget and blocking the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism ahead of the elections are crucial for the Hungarian government. Therefore, in building a new base, Fidesz relies on political forces with real power and control of governments in other EU countries. This could explain Orbán's meeting with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and the chairman of the Italian League, Matteo Salvini, on 1 April in Budapest. Such dependence would strengthen Poland's position with regard to Hungary. Extending this partnership to other groupings will be difficult, as other potential Fidesz partners (for example, the Slovenian centre-right SDS of Prime Minister Janez Janša or the party of Hungarians in Romania, UDMR) do not intend to leave the EPP. For these reasons, the emergence of a new party in the EP grouped around Fidesz is unlikely in the near future.