INTERVIEWS 11.04.2022

‘Hungary stopped being a democracy some time ago’

Hungary’s Viktor Orbán has won re-election. Former European Commissioner László Andor on what this means for Hungary, the EU and democracy at large

While many feared that Viktor Orbán might win his fifth term, the fact that he managed to win a record majority came as a shock and surprise to many. Why didn’t the united opposition fare better?

What had given rise to a relative optimism that the opposition might be able to win the 2022 election in Hungary was the fact that there had never been a six-party alliance before. In the previous three elections, fragmentation was a major factor in Orbán’s victories. But, of course, they could have done better. One aspect would have been to get rid of more toxic politicians from the past, especially the former Prime Minister (Ferenc Gyurcsány, who became infamous for his reckless secret speech in 2006). This might have won over more voters. The opposition’s candidate Péter Márki-Zay also made some mistakes. He wasted time over internal disputes – especially when the war came.

However, now, in light of the actual outcome, it seems like a very bold statement to claim that the opposition could actually have won. It is important now to discuss the structural reasons why a proper victory for the opposition is almost by definition excluded in the Hungarian political system. The fire power between the two sides was just too uneven. Some election experts say that *Fidesz* spent eight times more money than the opposition. If there is such a concentration of resources on one side, then it’s very hard to speak about equal chances and fair competition.

Orbán also implemented some modifications with regard to the electoral system.

Yes, these changes took place in 2011. Gerrymandering on a very large scale is the most notorious example. Less well-known is the role,

which voter suppression plays. One group that is strongly affected by this is Hungarians who live abroad. They are not allowed to vote by mail but need to go to an embassy or consulate. For many, this makes it hard or impossible to cast their ballot. However, this does not apply to the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, which has the right to vote by mail. It is a politically motivated distinction: ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries tend to be more in Orbán's camp while Hungarian expats in the West are more anti-Orbán.

A third example is the completely unequal access to state media. In the last four years, the opposition got five minutes on state television to express themselves while Orbán and *Fidesz* are basically on nonstop. There is no debate between the different candidates. The governing party can say whatever they like about the opposition and millions of viewers will have no reason to doubt it because it's the only version they get to hear.

What will it take to make the opposition stronger in the future?

There are three key aspects in my opinion: First, unity is crucial. The Hungarian political system is very far from proportional representation. If you have the massive *Fidesz* block on the one side, you need a strong oppositional block on the other side. Second, the question of the personnel, especially the front-line. The electorate is rewarding fresh, younger personalities. And they also want to see more female politicians – Hungarian politics is still extremely male-dominated, especially on the conservative side. Third, the policy focus. You have to create a program, which appeals to the majority of the voter base, which is still centre left. With Márki-Zay, whom I would call a modern conservative, there was a mismatch between his neoliberal convictions and the expectations of the mainstream opposition electorate, which leans towards social democratic values.

How did the Russian invasion of Ukraine impact the elections?

The war actually swept aside all campaign plans on both sides. For many years, Orbán has been a very close ally of Putin's. In one aspect, this is related to the highly important imports of Russian gas and oil. But in another, this is also tied to the ideology of the 'Eastern opening', the 'merits of the Eastern civilization' as opposed to Western values – a narrative, which Orbán and his advisers like to play.

After the war broke out, the opposition tried to – unsuccessfully – expose the close ties between Orbán and Putin and incriminate him for his reluctance to support Ukraine. However, Orbán managed to keep the upper hand. He explained that this conflict is not ours and

Hungary should not get involved. *Fidesz* started to accuse the opposition of war mongering, of trying to drag Hungary into this war. Since the opposition's candidate Márki-Zay was not given any kind of platform, he was unable to defend himself against these and other manufactured accusations.

Were there signs of Russian interference in the election?

Firstly, one has to ask what Russian interference is. When Orbán visited Putin in February, Putin mentioned in a press conference that he was selling gas to Hungary at a concessional rate. In a way, this can be seen as an intervention in the Hungarian election campaign because the gas price has been a crucial issue in Hungary for the past 20 years. Many households use gas for heating so it's a matter of great sensitivity. The question of whether to regulate the gas price or not has been at the centre of domestic political debate for a long time. Therefore, the message to the public from this press conference was: If we stick to Putin, then we will continue to receive gas at a friendly price.

During his victory speech, Orbán called Ukrainian president Zelenskyy an 'opponent'. Yet, a few days later, he is now offering to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. What is your assessment of this?

Hungary under Orbán cannot be a mediator exactly because Orbán has been so visibly pro-Putin that Ukraine would not accept him as neutral host. For example, in the same vein he expressed readiness to pay in roubles for Russian oil and gas import, which no one else in the EU has done, so this is another sign of being supportive of Putin (and his war). And there has been so much verbal conflict between the Ukrainian and the Hungarian governments that it was no big surprise that Zelenskyy was mentioned among foes. *Fidesz* in recent years has referred to the cultural disadvantages suffered by the ethnic Hungarian community in Ukraine, so it is doubtful that relations would improve any time soon.

There was also a referendum on LGBT+ issues on the ballot on Sunday. How did this influence the election?

Orbán was trying to trigger the Pavlovian reflexes of his electorate. While the majority of the society would be tolerant, LGBT+ issues have been positioned to be a contentious issue in Hungary in order to divide society and cement the cultural conservative block together. Together with the war, it made the election seem like a referendum on the fundamental values of the country, which makes it harder to use

the election as an assessment of the government performance in the previous cycle.

In previous elections, Orbán knew how to play on imaginary risks. In 2018, it was a 'flood of migrants' coming to Hungary. And now, it was the opposition sending Hungarian boys to die in Ukraine and promoting sex change operations in schools.

The subject of the referendum was a law banning the supposed 'advertising' of homosexuality and transsexuality, especially when it comes to children and youth. It would have prohibited any educational approach towards these issues. Voters were not able to choose between yes or no in the referendum but were supposed to answer a series of highly suggestive questions. However, despite his electoral win, Orbán did not manage to secure the passing of the referendum.

What comes next for Hungary? Will it be 'Orbán unleashed'?

After every victory, he became bolder. After Orbán's third election in 2018, he basically launched a culture war. The Academy of Sciences, the universities, theatres, all different segments of Hungarian culture and science became occupied in this wave. What is left? Not a lot. But he can still go further by eliminating or at least trying to eliminate the centre left and the opposition in general from the municipalities like Budapest. *Fidesz* used the pandemic to rule by decree and to weaken the municipalities, which were controlled by the opposition. Their economic power has been dramatically crippled. Orbán spends so much money, for example on the pension bonus he promised his voters and on tax cuts for young people, that some kind of consolidation will undeniably come. We have witnessed him several times consolidating the budget at the expense of the political opponent. And there will be further efforts of political revenge against the opposition. Over the last years, we witnessed various patterns, for example using state media in character assassination campaigns against specific people. Many people who previously participated in opposition activities have left the country because they were squeezed out of their jobs and their lives were made miserable.

On Wednesday, the EU Commission announced that they will now move of the second stage of the rule of law mechanism. It notified the Hungarian government of the breaches of EU standards and underlined the possible financial consequences. What was Orbán's reaction to this and how will his re-election impact the EU?

Needless to say, they will frame this decision in political colours as a Brussels' attack on Hungarian democracy and won't recognise the

material or legal base for it. Some years ago, a move like this could have made some impact, but now the EU leaders need to be particularly united and determined to prevent further power and asset grab in Hungary. This is a new, untested mechanism, so a lot will depend on the personalities in charge, namely von der Leyen, the European Commissioner for Budget and Administration as well as for Values and Transparency, Johannes Hahn, and Vera Jourova.

The EU needs to take the outcome of this election as clear evidence that Hungary stopped being a democracy some time ago. It's for the scholars to discuss when the precise turning point was. Some would argue that rule of law stopped already in 2011, others would say later or see a certain gradualism. In any case it is apparent that there is no control over the executive. The executive controls the institutions, which are meant to control the executive. So, there is no rule of law and there's no democracy.

The European Commission has been extremely tactical but I think they now see the enormous risk of this – especially for the internal cohesion of the European Union. This failure to maintain democracy and rule of law keeps coming back internally as a divisive issue. However, it is also a matter of the EU's external credibility when it comes to the accession process of the Western Balkans or when you want to provide an integration perspective for countries like Ukraine. If there are cases within the EU, which demonstrate such a steep decline when it comes to democracy and rule of law, it becomes very difficult to stress the importance of these standards externally.

Would Orbán ever consider leaving the EU?

No. If this were his aim he would have already left. He had all the powers to lead the country out of the EU. From his perspective, Hungary is in the best situation. We are in the EU, we are in NATO. At the same time, we are able to work pragmatically with Russia and China. And if 'pragmatic' means 'unprincipled', that's fine with him. His aim is to accumulate power, probably even further than in the current stage.

This interview was conducted by Anja Wehler-Schöck.



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