

Fidesz not unbeatable - but opposition still has plenty of work to do

A joint study of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Political Capital on the consequences of the most recent elections in Hungary - October 30, 2019

A changing Fidesz electorate

- **Fidesz's ability to mobilise its voters remains strong**, they can still gain new voters even in larger cities and the capital. Hungarians living in smaller settlements are strongly committed to the ruling party, which is partly the consequence of the locals' value orientation, but the vulnerability of poorer voters and the opposition's lack of embeddedness in these areas are also contributing factors.
- **County list results** leave no doubt that **Fidesz has a massive advantage** outside of the capital and the 23 cities with county rights (CCR). Fidesz was supported by 48-61% of the voters in the 19 counties in 2014, which improved to 51-69% in 2019. The ruling party's vote share improved in all but one county between the two elections. This is a massive improvement over 2014, especially if we consider that the party was already dominant in smaller settlements then. When the 2019 municipal election results are compared to those of the 2019 EP elections, Fidesz only strengthened in four counties, but this is rather indicative of the different nature of and stakes at the election rather than the party's loss of popularity.

Changes in Fidesz's popularity on county lists. Comparison of the 2014 and 2019 municipal election and the 2019 EP election results.¹

County	2014 Mun	2019 EP	2019 Mun	Difference betw 2019 Mun and 2019 EP	Difference betw 2019 Mun and 2014 Mun
Bács-Kiskun	55.7%	61.2%	60.4%	-0.7%	+4.7%
Baranya	51.1%	55.6%	57.1%	+1.5%	+6.0%
Békés	54.9%	54.2%	53.1%	-1.1%	-1.7%
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	49.0%	53.9%	58.8%	+4.9%	+9.8%
Csongrád	48.5%	57.2%	54.0%	-3.2%	+5.6%
Fejér	55.1%	57.9%	57.9%	0.0%	+2.8%
Győr-Moson-Sopron	60.4%	63.1%	62.2%	-1.0%	+1.7%
Hajdú-Bihar	56.2%	60.6%	60.1%	-0.5%	+3.9%
Heves	48.4%	54.0%	60.4%	+6.5%	+12.0%

¹ Since voters living in the capital and the 23 cities with county rights do not vote for county lists in municipal elections, we deducted the votes cast in these localities from EP election results. This was done to make the two datasets comparable.

Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	51.4%	56.3%	53.8%	-2.4%	+2.5%
Komárom-Esztergom	52.7%	51.9%	57.2%	+5.3%	+4.5%
Nógrád	53.4%	59.1%	58.2%	-0.9%	+4.8%
Pest	48.9%	51.6%	51.6%	0.0%	+2.7%
Somogy	48.0%	57.0%	52.9%	-4.1%	+5.0%
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	57.7%	65.1%	64.9%	-0.2%	+7.2%
Tolna	50.6%	60.5%	58.5%	-2.1%	+7.9%
Vas	57.8%	65.0%	61.6%	-3.5%	+3.7%
Veszprém	53.0%	56.5%	54.0%	-2.5%	+1.0%
Zala	56.8%	62.2%	61.3%	-0.9%	+4.6%

- The smaller a settlement is, the more popular Fidesz gets – this is the conclusion that can be drawn from data from 9 separate elections. However, contrary to popular belief, **it is not true that Fidesz is only strong in small rural settlements:** over a third of the party's voters live in the capital and the 23 cities with county rights.
- Moreover, Fidesz was successful in increasing the number of its voters between the 2018 general and the 2019 EP election in every Budapest district and cities with county rights, which is a good indication that the ruling party does not only have reserves in smaller settlements.
- The vast majority of Fidesz mayoral candidates received more votes in the 2019 municipal elections than five years earlier even in Budapest's districts and cities with county rights. Regardless, they often fell short of winning a mandate thanks to the effective cooperation of opposition parties. Following the elections, statements by actors in the ruling party have indicated that they understand **the era when the majority of mandates could be won while being in the minority is over.**

The conclusions for opposition cooperation

- The opposition managed to secure mayoral seats despite the fact that their Fidesz-affiliated rivals did not lose any votes almost anywhere. As a result of **cooperating more effectively, they could mobilise more new voters compared to 2014 than Fidesz did.** The reasons behind this are the following:
 - For the first time since 2006, the opposition fielded **a lord mayoral candidate who voters believed could be capable of beating his Fidesz-affiliated opponent.** This primarily gave a boost to campaigns in Budapest districts, but it had a nation-wide effect as well.
 - The opposition fielded **more credible mayoral candidates embedded locally** than in 2014 (but not even close to fielding such a candidate in all Budapest districts and cities



with county rights). Although many – mainly in larger towns – viewed the municipal elections as an anti-Orbán referendum in larger settlements, the opposition also managed to reach out to voters who want candidates to give answers to local issues.

- The Fidesz-dominated media space and its inability to access public advertising surfaces made **the opposition understand that it has two remaining channels to reach its voters: social media and face-to-face campaigns.**

Mayors before and after 2019 municipal elections in 23 Budapest districts

	Districts led by Fidesz-affiliated mayors	Districts led by opposition mayors
Before the election	17	6
After the election	7 (+2 independents supported by Fidesz)	14

Mayors before and after 2019 municipal elections in 23 cities with county rights

	Cities led by Fidesz-affiliated mayors	Cities led by opposition mayors
Before the election	19	4
After the election	12 (+1 independent supported by Fidesz)	10

- **The 14 opposition victories in Budapest districts** constitute a **considerable breakthrough**, especially compared to very moderate expectations. This result is enough for providing Lord Mayor Gergely Karácsony a comfortable majority in the Budapest Assembly to control the capital city (18 out of the 33 mandates). It must also be noted that the then-divided opposition gained more votes altogether in all of Budapest’s single-member constituencies in the 2018 general election than Fidesz’s candidates did. The 2019 municipal elections marked the first time the opposition fielded joint candidates (one opposition mayoral candidate in all districts); thus, winning 9 districts could also be interpreted as a **solid performance by Fidesz**.
- **The 10 opposition wins in cities with county rights are also more than expected.** However, if we consider that in the 2018 general election opposition candidates received more votes than Fidesz-backed ones in 21 out of the 23 cities, and the municipal elections marked the first time with joint opposition candidates in most of these settlements, the opposition’s achievements in the 2019 municipal elections do not seem that impressive anymore. This indicates that



besides party sympathies the embeddedness of local candidates (both a mayoral and a parliamentary one) and whether people believe they can beat their Fidesz-affiliated competitor also influence voters' decisions.

- The fruitful cooperation in the 2019 municipal elections proved that the opposition has learned some lessons. However, **the cooperation strategy for the 2022 general election is yet to be developed. One thing is certain: a joint candidate has to challenge Fidesz's candidate in all 106 single-member constituencies. Whether the opposition should field a joint party list or run separately is a point for argument.**
 - The municipal election involves multiple levels, so the space for cooperation is much larger (there are 169 Hungarian settlements with a population of over 10 000, all of these elect a mayor, and there are county and city assemblies as well). In contrast, the parties can only divide 106 single-member constituencies in the general election. Finding and building up consensual candidates in single-member constituencies might be the most important task for the opposition the next two and a half years remaining until the general election.
 - It will be even harder to find a **consensual prime ministerial candidate**, of which there is only one. This is not only a question related to character, but also to which party gains the leading role in the cooperation. One of the main concerns is how the opposition will be able to solve this issue or will it be able to solve it at all?
 - The fact that opposition voters were willing to vote for the mayoral candidates of other parties in numerous places does **not necessarily mean that they see the solution in fielding one, joint opposition list in the general election.** The voters were undoubtedly satisfied with the opposition fielding consensual mayoral candidates, but the **EP election showed that they also want to indicate their changing party preferences** even if it surprises the parties themselves.
 - The parties will certainly use the position they gained in 2019 to build up their own networks and improve their own popularity. This will generate **rivalry** between them, but it depends solely on them whether it proves to be destructive or constructive.
 - For the current Hungarian opposition to be able to get close to forcing a change of government, they will primarily have to **convince their highly heterogenous voter base that they are capable of governing.** They took the first big step by **breaking the myth of Fidesz's invincibility with their results in the municipal elections.** However, the opposition has a lot of work to do if they want to be a real challenger to Fidesz in 2022.