

Outlook for Hungary 2022

Eszter NOVA

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Introduction

2022 will be the year of a momentous election in Hungary. We can't see past it but we can line up the forces that shape the outcome. We will analyze the four possible scenarios of election results – supermajority or simple majority to either side – and what may come after.

Since the Orbán-regime is changing the rules of the game and springs new problems and realities at the country virtually every day, every attempt at guessing the future is extraordinarily futile. Today, we can see the picture of an indebted country with an empty budget and mighty economic troubles inherited by anyone who wins in 2022 – tomorrow a new set of measures might paint that picture even darker.

The governability of the country is at stake. By now only Orbán himself has the power to govern. If his person is replaced, even within his own party, his successor would be in trouble with the powerful institutional and economic forces that Orbán created to mess with a potential successor. After Orbán the governability of the country will be damaged.

The international political landscape has substantially changed in the last year and the trend of aspiring western autocrats appears to be reversed. Orbán has lost many political allies (in the sense that they lost power in their own countries) and clings to the remaining few. While posing as the vanguard of the autocratic movement, his political fate is not really in his own hands. It will likely be sealed by whatever happens in the global arena. The events that transpire between the great powers are impossible to predict – yet they will have the greatest impact on what happens in Hungarian politics.

Orbán has recently described himself as the thorn in the side of the European Union – and that is the scope of what he can be in Europe. Nothing less, but nothing more either.

The global economic landscape has also shifted and a long overdue economic downturn appears to have arrived – it is only a matter of time until politicians are forced to admit it. For Orbán the economy is now a race against time: will it collapse before the elections and collapse on him or will it drown the next government? He appears to be fully aware that he never governed through an economic downturn. Indeed, both times he rose to power on the wave of discontent against its predecessors caused by economic crises. And both times he was helped by the fact that his predecessors felt obliged to fix the economy by austerity packages before the elections – duly losing to Orbán and leaving him a better economy. Orbán may have found

himself in their unenviable position, but he is not going to make that mistake to do a favor to his successor. He is bent on leaving an empty budget, heavy-handed price controls, a mountain of debt and the full fallout from the runaway inflation on his successor.

This is why some question whether he wants to win in 2022 – or by what degree. Letting his opposition be buried under the avalanche of problems would allow him to sail back into power in 2026 the latest, maybe earlier, and blame the hardship on his opponents. This speculation is supported by the evident efforts to both win the elections (by the biggest ever election giveaway) and to prepare to lose it (by outsourcing economic and political power into loyalist hands and out of the reach of any future government). An opposition that only wins by a simple majority will be a lame duck and can not claw back any of the power or assets by legal means.

After a brief summary of the events and trends of 2021 (both domestic and global) the analysis will focus on the four election scenarios in Hungary, their possible consequences and what happens next.

The short 2021

2021 didn't just feel like a blur due to the pandemic. Hungarian political developments have also been a mere extension of 2020. The dilemmas and priorities haven't changed – culminating in the general elections on April 3, 2022 – and it has been the rationale behind everything that happened in 2021.

The punishment of opposition cities continued as expected but Orbán has also made steps to prepare for losing 2022. Orbán's efforts to cement his loyalists in positions of power in case of a loss has been a much-discussed development in its own right. And while it is hopeful news for those who wish for a regime change, it is a bad news to the country, the budget and the legal system. Meanwhile, Orbán's efforts to prepare for losing have coincided with his efforts of securing his victory. At any rate, he sent every last man and every last forint in the budget into war – and then some.

At the same time it is not obvious that he really should want to win. Given the state of the economy and the coming economic downturn, whoever wins this election will lose. He appears to be fully aware of that – as well as of his pure luck that followed him when it comes to economic circumstances, and that luck might run out any time. Weathering the storm in opposition and returning triumphantly after the crisis swept them away is not necessarily a losing strategy – especially if he can make sure that the next government will have no legal or economic power to get anything done, and if he can still control a large part of the media to spin public perception about the next government.

Orbán's visible domestic priorities before the 2022 elections have been:

- To outsource as much public wealth into private (loyalist) hands as possible, eclipsing even the post-1989 privatization in scope, but with no benefit to the state.

The “foundation” method of playing public funds into private (crony) hands has been first used at the central bank. By the time the scandal broke in 2016 the central bank has already outsourced around a billion dollars into foundations.¹ When the revelations were made

¹ A summary of the main points of scandal can be found at index.hu https://index.hu/aktak/az_mnb-alapitvanyok_botranya/

public, parliament attempted to pass a law that included the now infamous phrase that once public money is sent to these entities “it loses its public nature”.

Unfortunately for them the phrase rhymed splendidly with Yellow Submarine so a series of spirited protests followed – but to no avail. The law permitting taxpayer money to “lose its public nature” was eventually scrapped but the central bank foundations never stopped operation in the absence of legal scrutiny over politically powerful figures so the model is still ongoing.

As for the legal justification of the practice, we had to wait until after the Biden election in 2020. In the midst of the pandemic, while everyone was hanging on the news awaiting lockdown details, the Orbán-government announced (not the lockdown rules but) a new change to the basic law. It approached the public money problem from the opposite end and changed the definition of public money to delimit it. It is now essentially whatever is in the budget and in central organizations. The effect is the same: once public money is spent, it is no longer public, i.e. not under scrutiny.

And the foundation model roared back to life. This time sixteen new “public interest-serving foundations” were established. These are essentially asset management vehicles that received tens of billions of euros in cash and state assets – as a gift and without any accountability or strings attached. Some of them had a university slapped to it – leading international discussion on the completely wrong path, arguing whether it is just the privatization of higher education. It is not. The boards of the foundations have been filled with known loyalists, appointed for life, and not accountable to any future government. Another path where public money was siphoned out of state coffers was through churches, through assets and cash.

The amount spent this way is more than comparable to the volume of the privatization after 1989 – but even more disadvantageous to the state and the taxpayer.² Finally, a years-old

² There are number of attempts to compile the extent of privatization in 2021, but none is complete. K-Monitor, a corruption watchdog compiled some of the assets here: Nem kérték, nem indokolták, csak eltették - Az állami vagyon volt 2021 legnagyobb vesztese 3 January 2022

https://k.blog.hu/2022/01/03/nem_kertek_csak_eltettek_az_allami_vagyon_volt_2021_legnagyobb_vesztese
Rejtett privatizáció: az elmúlt évben több ezermilliárdos vagyon került az államtól a kormánypart által uralt alapítványokhoz 27 December 2021 Átlátszó.hu <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2021/12/27/rejtett-privatizacio-az-elmult-evben-tobb-ezermilliardos-vagyon-kerult-az-allamtol-a-kormanypart-atal-uralt-alapitvanyokhoz/>

On the issue of stuffing the boards with loyalists rather than reformin universities: Reform helyett az egyetemek politikai megszállása zajlott le a szemünk előtt 4 November 2021, Telex

<https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/11/04/egyetem-autonomia-kuratorium-akademiai-szabadsag-alapitvany-polonyi-istvan-ronay-zoltan-eotvos-csoport>

method of channeling a part of corporate income taxes directly into sport (mostly football) associations has been extended to include newly established “foundations”– and get a rebate from the state. In the end, these foundations might be a more convenient long-term revenue source for cronies than lavish international sport events.

- To buy back Budapest Airport – either through cronies or by the state.

This goal was later put on ice due to money issues after much wrangling and many legal and economic obstacles thrown at the current – foreign – owners to persuade them to sell.

- To demonstrate power through the punishment of opposition cities.
- To cronify entire economic sectors.

A new state authority was created to handle decades-long concessions awarded to loyalists in the fields of highway construction, gambling, waste management and recycling, liquidation, etc. The skyrocketing energy prices and the resulting government micromanagement enabled the entrenchment of the sector even further. The telecom, retail and banking sectors were also impacted.

- Cementing Russian and Chinese interests and putting them outside of the discretion of any future government.

They are most visibly the Russian nuclear power station project, Paks II, the Chinese railway project between Budapest and Belgrade, and the Budapest campus of the Chinese Fudan university.

- Make as many international sports events irreversible as possible.
- Render Hungary ungovernable by anyone other than Orbán.

It includes decade-long appointments on the top of independent institutions as well as the infamous 2/3 laws that have proliferated to the point where a simple majority can only make symbolic decisions. The central bank, the prosecution, the aforementioned concession authority, the top judges, the constitutional court, the media authority, etc. will become an opposition to the government if anyone other than Orbán would win.

- Empty the budget and take on as much debt as possible.

Through the biggest ever election giveaway, taking on historic record debt, running record deficit and generally borrowing from the future to pay for this campaign. This is neatly in

line with the previous point of rendering the country ungovernable by anyone other than himself.

- Hollow out state healthcare and drive customers into loyalists' new private "superhospitals".

1. International outlook

The most spectacular international development of 2021 (from Hungary's perspective) is the number of aspiring Western autocrats losing power. Orbán's international allies have been decimated in the last couple of years with Yanukovich, Berlusconi, Mubarak, Netanyahu, Strache, Trump, Nazarbayev and Sarkozy all losing power and/or meeting obstacles in some way. Erdogan, Duterte and Bolsonaro are also facing challenges and Erdogan's self-inflicted inflationary spiral is a particular cautionary tale Orbán must be watching closely (as evidenced by his price fixing).

Orbán's most effective long-time enabler, Angela Merkel, has also left office and her successors are much less eager to keep appeasing Orbán – and more likely to score popularity points at home for standing up to him. The results of the French presidential elections are also closely watched with most candidates paying a visit to Orbán and taking sides on the issue of him.

The unexpected departure of Austria's Sebastian Kurz and the Czech Republic's Andrej Babiš hit Orbán especially hard and his men are hinting at Americans' hand in these cases. He keeps mentioning the possibility of foreign "election interference", meaning, but never mentioning US president Biden by name.

The Pegasus and Pandora scandals may have been purely unrelated to the shift in US foreign policy but they happened to coincide with it. And while the Pegasus scandal only hit Orbán's international reputation (at home he weathered the crisis by staunch silence and then insisting it was legal), Pandora-like revelations about his own, personal wealth might be worrisome for him. Not because it is a secret but because it would prove that he is not the strongest one out there.

Leaders of the European Union appear to have finally made up their minds about confronting Orbán as there seems to be popularity to gain from it. There even appear to be efforts to make some of their measures felt before the 2022 Hungarian elections. The taps of dumb money were shut – forcing the government to go into even more debt – and the threats about legal consequences might also be of substance.

Meanwhile, the Polish-Hungarian coalition against Europe appears to be strained by their diverging approach to Russia. Indeed, the renewed efforts to create a pan-European anti-Europe nationalist alliance have been thwarted again by that very issue. And while the Polish constitutional court served Europe with its biggest legal challenge yet, their Hungarian counterparts refused to do the same and to announce the supremacy of national law. It is Orbán's dirty work and for some reason they have shied away from crossing this particular line.

Political insubordination of this kind has been unheard of before 2020, when Orbán's myth of invincibility cracked at home, but it is quite common today. Their extent is very limited and the way Orbán's loyalist now dare to speak up against tiny things would not register as a rebellion in any normal country – but it is remarkable compared to even 2019.

The biggest geopolitical showdown of the year is between the United States and Russia (and later China). Orbán has to follow the developments very carefully – although he had already put all his (and Hungary's) eggs in the anti-US, pro-autocracy basket. In this effort he is now the role model of Trumpist Republicans in the US, with Tucker Carlson of Fox News having spent a whole week in Hungary and shooting a shamelessly sycophantic interview with Orbán, ignoring every policy issue that is supposedly important to the Republicans. In the run-up to the 2022 elections Orbán is rumored to host the Republicans' conference and Donald Trump announced his unconditional support for Orbán. Whatever happens between the US, China and Russia will be of utmost importance to Hungary – yet Hungarians have no control over it.

Even with a defeat, Orbán is not expected to lose economic power and much of his influence in Hungary, so the question arises whether he can continue fulfilling his role as transmitter of Russia's (and China's) interests in the EU. That would predict his political future as well.

Mark Leonard and Jeremy Shapiro from the European Council of Foreign Relations predicted for 2022 that the Democrats may lose one or both houses of the US Congress – and that would drive the president's attention to foreign policy.³ That is a development Orbán may not want since the Biden-administration's dislike for autocracy (and knowledge of Hungary in particular)

³ 2022: The road to recovery (again) 7 January 2022, ECFR <https://ecfr.eu/article/2022-the-road-to-recovery-again/>

is paired with the view that tackling corruption would also tackle autocrats, given how they are more kleptocrats than ideology-driven autocrats these days.

Global economic downturn – the end of a cycle

Orbán has been preparing for the next economic downturn since his reelection in 2018.

All of a sudden he went from economic success reports to stern warnings that one day we might have to endure hardship and that the nation is more important than economic wellbeing. He could clearly see that no economic cycle is forever and that one is about to burst. And he had never been in the unfortunate position of power when it happened.

Indeed he had risen to power on the wave of economic discontent against his predecessors each time he gained power, in 1998 and 2010. His predecessors reigned over an economic crisis, they enacted austerity measures to fix the budget – and Orbán catapulted into power on the basis of unpopularity of his predecessors and inherited a better balanced budget from them. He is not about to commit the same mistake and show restraint before the elections. He is also not going to do such a favor to whoever comes after him.

After eleven years and with an economic crisis looming, Orbán has enacted the biggest ever election spending and taken on historic record debt. Some begin to wonder whether we have overestimated him on the economy. He wasted the years of plenty without forming reserves – or at least not to the public. Indeed, his favorite policy moves seem to be massive spending – not so much to stimulate the economy, but to benefit his loyalists – and price controls. His thoughts about the economy are that of a law professional (his degree) and not that of an economist.

His war on state debt has also remained in the realm of bellicose words, quickly thrown out the window when he needed cash to spend on vanity projects and vote buying. And his economic governance can be best described as hand-picked oligarchy that distorts the market and intimidates and crowds out honest businesses, supported by massive, un-earned financial resources supplied by taxpayers. It is curious why he became the idol of supposedly pro-market

political entities in the West. His habit of over-communicating tax cuts might have to do with it, but that, too, was only enabled by the influx of EU funds that made him less dependent on taxes (and the 27% VAT he always forgets to mention).

The inflationary factors are also not only of foreign origin. The political decision to weaken the forint led to a 37% weakening against the euro since Orbán gained power in 2010, adding to the general inflationary pressure from energy prices. Orbán's proud decision to give more money to the people (in the form of public sector pay rises before the election and housing subsidies) to be able to afford the higher prices, testifies to an Erdogan-degree of economic illiteracy. It is also very belated and immediately soaked up by the inflation.

While the US-government has to face its own stupidity for the unprecedented money printing bonanza in the form of pandemic bailouts (and voter enticement), the Hungarian one is responsible for the record inflation on other fronts: by purposely weakening the forint and for the unprecedented election spending on targeted beneficiary groups.

Hungary is facing a mighty economic downturn with record high inflation, record weak currency, record high debt, record budget deficit, and record election spending. Meanwhile, the indebtedness of the population is also at record high, having increased by 40% just in 2021, thanks to massive government push to give conditional housing subsidies (part loans, part handouts) to "traditional" families. Most of the subsidies were soaked up by the resulting price increase, but the policy definitely achieved its political goal of punishing non-traditional families and those who are not credit-worthy. As of the inflationary pressure on the housing market, Orbán reacted with price fixing and an odd export ban on imported construction materials – and announcing that families must receive enough from the state to pay for the difference.

The global economy (and the opposition) will be blamed for what happens after the elections – but it is also a home-grown, politically fueled crisis.

2. Domestic outlook

2022 is the year of The Election in Hungary. After 12 years of Orbán's rule without any counterbalance there seems to be a chance of a change of government – if only technically.

This is the first time since 2010 that the opposition parties managed to put together a unified – albeit uneasy – coalition and unite behind a prime minister candidate.

By 2021 it has become clear that Orbán has lost his battle against Brussels so he couldn't keep receiving and distributing exorbitant sums to buy loyalty and to maintain his unquestioned rule within his own party. The top priority thus became the outsourcing of public wealth into private, loyalist hands. It is to buy them off one more time and also to make sure that the next government will go bankrupt immediately. It is the same logic Orbán used against opposition cities. Long gone are the days when governments felt the obligation to tidy up after themselves and balance budgets after they overspent.

While Brussels and the European leaders appear to be determined to stop appeasing Orbán and to make consequences happen before the April elections, they are not expected to make a dent on his campaign. At any rate, the date was set to the earliest possible moment that was legally available. This might be due to the race against time vis-à-vis the economy or due to Brussels. It can also serve to shorten the amount of time during which embarrassing revelations can be made.

At any rate, Orbán's followers (and much of the country) will never learn what really happened in Brussels, even if the sanctions bite before the election. To understand how powerful Orbán's media blackout is, one has only to look at the impact of the pandemic management – both economically and in terms of death rates. World record death rates paired with virtually non-existent bailouts – but it didn't impact Orbán's popularity.

Sometimes what is not shown matters more than what is, and power over the media helps to conceal things as well as to control where the attention goes. During the pandemic the media was not allowed to go near hospitals, healthcare workers have been investigated and brought under a quasi-military contract to control the flow of information, even between hospitals, to ban resignation and to allow for the government to screen every last one of them in search for whistleblowers. Any pandemic tragedy can be written off as a personal one without confirmation that they were not alone. It remains to be seen whether the families of those impacted (40 thousand Covid deaths and delayed medical care for other diseases) can be made to see their losses as inevitable and isolated incidents. Healthcare has never been a strong suit of the regime and the pandemic placed way too much attention on it. They fought back against the attention – not the underlying issues.

On the domestic level, Orbán's biggest triumph against democracy this year have been the injection of unprecedented sums into his own ideological hinterland (and changed the

constitution to make it irreversible), allegedly to make sure that they can endure a long time in opposition, but also to serve as an obstacle to any future government that is not his. He had also placed plenty of landmines in the constitutional and economic system in the shape of decades-long economic concessions and loyalist appointees at the helm of independent institution whose tenure is expected to outlast a new government, maybe even more.

The opposition primaries

After the 2019 success at the municipal elections the Hungarian opposition has started to regain its sense of self and legitimacy. In 2021 they have also figured out a way to cooperate and stand under the same flag: primaries to elect their shared candidate for prime minister.

This development may activate a large voter group, those who didn't vote because there wasn't any mathematical chance of a regime change. Scarce byelection data supports this theory. Based on this information, the united opposition has to show that they can win – rather than fighting over a shared program and advertising it.

The united opposition and its new prime ministerial candidate is the news of the year. The primaries they staged to find the shared candidate have even stolen attention from Orbán – while they lasted. Ever since then the opposition is all but invisible, having been bogged down by infighting, the difficulties of cooperating, coming up with a shared program, and by the tension sown by Orbán's campaign team. They are also all but invisible to Orbánist media consumers and thus to the entire countryside. Their silence can, however, be a sign that they simply cannot afford a protracted campaign financially. It may also be a benefit as their infighting is less in the limelight.

The new prime minister candidate does not come from any of the six opposition parties – and that was a shock for both Orbán's campaign juggernaut and the opposition parties. The winner was such a black horse, the independent media took a week to come up with even a profile on him and analysts eagerly scrutinized it for clues about the candidate. It has also posed a new problem for the candidate: even independent political journalists had their eyes on one of the two big opposition candidates. They would have accepted if one of those won – but they seemingly can't accept the dark horse's candidacy.

Orbán's campaign machine was also flabbergasted by the development. They have prepared their entire campaign based on the incitement against former prime minister Gyurcsány. It served to discredit both potential candidates: Gyurcsány's wife ran as the candidate of his party, so that was straightforward. Orbán's spin doctors were also prepared to smear Budapest

mayor Gergely Karácsony in case he wins – and they apparently had their arsenal ready to fire as soon as the primary results came in.

But they had nothing on the dark horse (yet) so they had to launch the carefully managed campaign against the Budapest mayor after the primaries – when he wasn't even the candidate anymore.

Who is Péter Márki-Zay, the prime ministerial candidate of the united opposition?⁴

Unlike Orbán, the new leader of the united opposition is an actual conservative. Whether he can keep the opposition together is anyone's guess. The united opposition's job now is not to present an appealing program but to show that they can win. Ideological nuances and a program full of detailed policy proposals only serve as a target to criticism.

It is not a positive thing, voters deserve something to go by in their decision, but Fidesz has deteriorated public discourse to the point where they stopped publishing programs (a long time ago) and their campaigns have become as emojis on billboards and creating hate targets. Orbán's campaign team is called his "enemy management" machine.

Furthermore, even if the united opposition wins, and even if they win by a supermajority, their disagreements will make any coordinated policy impossible. (It is not a bad thing, we have seen what "effectiveness" means.) In this milieu Márki-Zay's ideological stance and policy beliefs don't even matter but there are still some clues.

Péter Márki-Zay is somewhat of a dark horse in Hungarian politics. He has no party behind him - but he has scored one of the biggest victories against Orbán in February 2018, running for mayor in his home town and proving that a united opposition can beat Orbán's party even in

⁴ This segment is based on profiles appearing in the Hungarian media.

The American dad against the entire Hungarian political elite - Who is Péter Márki-Zay? by 444 (25 October 2021)

<https://444.hu/tldr/2021/10/25/az-amerikai-fater-az-egesz-magyar-politikai-élet-ellen-ki-is-ez-a-marki-zay-peter>

Péter Márki-Zay: From guest worker with seven children to challenging Orbán by Telex.hu (17 October 2021)

<https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/10/17/marki-zay-peter-portre-eletut-elovalasztas-mindenki-magyarorszaga-mozgalom-hodmezovasarhely>

Péter Márki-Zay, the visionary by Jelen, 8 October 2021 <https://jelen.media/portre/marki-zay-peter-a-lattato-2361>

the most loyal Orbánist district. (That, too, had nothing to do with programs, only with the vision that there is a chance against Orbán.)

The opposition didn't have time to put the new lessons into practice before the 2018 general elections that followed just two months later. But their work has been cut out for them ever since: to unite. It has been facilitated by Orbán himself when he changed the election law (after his divorce with the EPP and Biden's victory) and forced the opposition to legally unite before the election, to avoid serious mathematical punishment that befalls small parties.

In the pursuit of the goal of uniting the opposition they started a new tradition, a joint primary election, that proved to be an unexpected success. And the one who was tipped to become their shared candidate in 2022 was Gergely Karácsony, the soft-spoken green mayor of Budapest. But Márki-Zay managed to convince him to step down before the second round of the opposition primaries and let Márki-Zay win the candidacy at record participation.

The most important takeaways about Márki-Zay are that he is personally a conservative, cosmopolitan, social liberal, pro-market politician. Whether he can influence the opposition's shared program is a question, but his powers of persuasion are already much-discussed. Anyone who ever met him returns converted – much like Orbán used to impress people when he was younger.

Márki-Zay has solid conservative and Christian credentials (both Catholic and Protestant), having been a practicing religious man with seven children and working as a civilian in local churches. He is one of the disillusioned Fidesz voters who was alienated by populism. He is currently sharing many policy views that are optimized for Fidesz-voters, including keeping the border wall.

According to his profiles that appeared in the media, he grew disillusioned by Fidesz' 2006 election campaign that was built on the message that we are living worse than four years ago - bashing the government but not offering anything better. (Fidesz lost the 2006 elections, although Orbán refused to accept it.) Today Márki-Zay has no kind words to say about Orbán's subsequent autocratic turn.

He has degrees in economics, political science and engineering and speaks fluent English. His wife is a physicist and she used to be a midwife until her career was cut short by a media campaign. Márki-Zay spent five years working in the US and Canada between 2004 and 2009, one of their children was born in the US. Unlike Orbán, Márki-Zay has actually worked in the private sector - an absolute rarity among Hungarian politicians - both in the US and in Hungary.

In the US he worked his way up from door-to-door sales and lugging furniture to a management role in corporate marketing.

The US has profoundly shaped his views. He expressed admiration for the American attitude of private initiative, of voluntary charitable work, and of not expecting the state to take care of everything. He encourages travel and foreign experience to everyone - but also to return after it.

He praised the American democratic system of checks and balances that thwarted even Trump's attacks, expressed elation that an African American president was elected and studied the campaigns of John McCain, Clinton and Obama up close. An acolyte of pure American values that the US Republicans claim to represent (very unconvincingly), but not completely uncritical. He expressed disapproval of the American health insurance system, for example.

Upon his return to Hungary he was offered to participate in Fidesz' cronyist giveaway and winners, but he was repulsed by the corruption of the local political elite so he took yet another private sector job. He moved even within Hungary - a hugely unusual thing, and possibly an asset at the elections.

While remaining religious in his own way he is liberal on social issues, a cosmopolitan who praises diversity without having any visible political benefit from it. Religious, but not a political Christianist - unlike Orbán. Doesn't appear to be a fundamentalist but bends religion to his values instead. According to an anecdote about him he once considered becoming a monk (and his wife a nun) before they met. He defines God as love. Calls for a "love campaign", versus Orbán's hate campaigns - confusing absolutely everyone on every side - and believes that people are fundamentally good.

But that doesn't stop him to be edgy in his communication against Orbán. Most controversially he bashed Orbán's anti-gay propaganda by calling out gay Fidesz politicians and bringing up widely shared gossips (no evidence) about Orbán. This might be a tactic from a marketing guy as the independent media only ever mentions him for his controversial remarks, then makes him comment on them, thus giving him extra air time. At this point this appears to be the only way the opposition can make it into the media – apart from their infighting, and being bashed for complacency. Whether Márki-Zay's controversial remarks are a marketing tool to grab attention or a sign of an amateur politician who says things out loud is yet to be seen.

Márki-Zay has a messianic attitude, he even claims to have entered politics based on a vision. But not a vision of Jesus or a burning bush, but a personal revelation. He doesn't take the Bible

literally, and his messianic vision may be an asset in the mud of the coming campaign - but also a liability in the long run.

He is popular with youth and voters who are tired of parties because he came from outside of the political elite (has no party himself) and lacks the stale, repulsive reputation of party establishments both on government and in opposition - Orbán being the definition of political establishment in Hungary. But having no party might become an issue if he cannot cooperate with established opposition parties. He is neither Gyurcsány, nor Orbán, and that is a breath of fresh air, welcomed by voters. But the six opposition parties have already blocked his efforts to launch his own party to gain a foothold – in exchange for letting most of his policy proposals into the shared program.

He appears to charm everyone in person as intelligent and straightforward. He has the confidence of the uncorrupted and runs on a heavy anti-corruption ticket. But both intelligence and not being corrupt can be a liability in politics.

Márki-Zay also often features in the international media. In his interview on Amanpour on CNN Márk-Zay turned the tables on Orbán on issues like migration (pointing out that Orbán allowed massive immigration of favored cronies in his residency program) and Christianity (pointing out that "there is nothing Christian about corruption".) But he was quickly hit by the label of being like Trump ("he is an outsider like Trump") that will be difficult to shrug.

Orbán's election chances

His domestic power has grown. But his luck has run out. Both on the economy and in European and international politics. Under pressure he reached for three things that had once worked for him: referendums, a hate campaign and bashing the previous prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány. He also brings his followers to the streets regularly.

In order to understand Orbán's domestic election chances we must first look at the factors that gave him his current power. What about it was being in the right place at the right time – and what was of his own doing? Has either of those two increased or diminished?

As for the myth of Orbán's political talent, one should remember that his success in creating an uncontested autocracy rested on two preconditions – neither of which has been of his own making.

1. A constitutional supermajority without coalition partners or any dissent from within the ranks of his own MPs.

Hungarians are not more corrupt, authoritarian or dumb than their counterparts in the region – but no country can withstand the kind of abuse of power that an unchecked supermajority can unleash on the legal system (especially not when it is supported by an avalanche of EU money).

2. The unprecedented, massive influx of easy money coming from the European Union.

What Orbán personally added to his power grab was being the uncontested leader of his own party, Fidesz, ever since the 1990s. (He regularly forgets to mention this to his international fan club of aspiring Western autocrats: that they can't emulate him while they still have internal dissent within their own parties, let alone with coalition partners⁵ or without a constitutional supermajority.)

And the 2/3 parliamentary majority in 2010 wasn't solely due to his formidable political talents either, but partly a voter backlash against the previous government, an economic recession, the mortgage crisis, and a massive austerity package.

What he added to it was an aggressive street campaign (escalating in the Budapest riots of 2006) and a demagogic referendum in 2008 that made the previous government even more unpopular. Both referendums and working the streets have become favored go-to tools in his arsenal, things he reaches to when under pressure - such as now. The events between 2006 and 2008 have also solidified his grip over his party. It has not been even remotely challenged ever since.

Had Orbán not gained a constitutional majority in 2010, he would not have been in the position to reshape Hungary and remove the checks on his power in the following years. The subsequent supermajorities happened on an increasingly tilted electoral field and with increasingly lopsided rules and campaign resources between Orbán and his opponents.

⁵ Outsiders will point out that Orbán's Fidesz technically does have a coalition partner, but that is just for technical reasons. No one actually believes that the Christian democratic KDNP has any political weight, not least because it hasn't been a party with any measurable support of its own for more than a decade. Its presence in the "coalition" is pure optics. Apart from serving as the supposed source of political Christianist policy proposals (such as homophobia and the hatemongering against non-traditional lifestyles) KDNP helps Fidesz to plant twice as many men into well-paid positions and twice as many votes in committees. Most recently it had helped Orbán to maintain a presence in Fidesz' European party family, pretending that they were totally not Fidesz when Fidesz was gently self-suspended in the EPP.

Due to the supermajority, the source of power has first migrated from the parliament to the Fidesz fraction, then to the party, which is to say to Orbán himself. His iron grip on his MPs was gently tested when the pandemic started, but it was quickly neutralized by the emergency rule by decrees.

The second source of Orbán's formidable power that was out of his control was EU funds. Their flow started under his reign in earnest – and he didn't fail to put every last penny in the service of buying loyalty. A system of local strongmen has been created to make sure that the distribution is purely based on political loyalty.

By 2020, the EU funds gravy train became a tool to building a loyalist base for Orbán and stemming resistance. Indeed, the recent, vague criticism that comes from Orbán's ranks is due to the drying up of the EU-cash avalanche. Orbán's efforts to buy off as many loyalists as possible in 2021 might be a sign that without the glue of bottomless money they are not such a formidably disciplined army, after all. Certain loyalists may overlook his policies – but not the ebbing of the money tide.⁶

Orbán's weakness are thus his loyalists.⁷ In 2019, when Fidesz's election machinery first hit a speed bump Orbánists were surprisingly quick to speak out and complain to the media. After nine years of militant silence and charging shoulder-to-shoulder they broke ranks and yelped at the first small sign of defeat. Some openly wrote off their chances in 2022 and major Fidesz MPs have abandoned their Budapest electoral districts 18 months before the elections for safer constituencies. Orbán has always delivered them the money from Brussels and even the election victories – and now that their father failed to deliver they acted like all was lost. It was

⁶ A reminder of the EU's culpability for the emergence of the Hungarian autocracy. In light of how much Orbán's autocracy has been resting on the pillar of a never-before-seen amount of money at his disposal to buy loyalty – coupled with Brussels willingness to let him distribute it all by himself – it is painfully ironic how the entire world is expecting the stupefied, divided and starved Hungarian opposition to fix their country's problems. They don't have money to appeal. They can't even afford experts and professionals. The problem is only partially domestic. The EU has a lot of blame to take.

Just like in 1956 when resistance against the Russian occupation was bound to fail, no matter how many brave men, women and children took to the street to protest the Soviet tanks, the resistance to Hungary's current autocratic push (also emanating from Moscow) is also facing formidable enemies – from outside of Hungary. Those, who enable it financially. They created a wall of money and power pro-democracy activist now have to fight without a penny and with the fraction of the visibility of the well-fed autocrat, amidst a sea of voters who lost belief that a living can ever be made outside of being invited to win public tenders.

Sure, those minds are corrupted. But it was not a good idea to throw money at a malfunctioning system and hope that it will improve itself – exactly when it doesn't need to anymore.

⁷ The Pegasus scandal also shed light on Orbán's cadre problem. Apart from the usual targets like journalists and opposition activists the software was used against loyalists as well. Distrust within the ranks of a top-down, loyalism-based organisation is normal. But loyalists surrounding the government's most important projects such as the Paks II Russian nuclear power station were also tapped.

a lesson on the underlying weakness of the structure we have all forgotten in the nine long years while they marched together, unchallenged.

In 2021 Orbán has been busy buying back loyalty in his ranks – a sign that his power was more based on carrots than was previously thought.

Orbán had not built his power on the basis of real popularity, much of the incentives to support him were rooted in his strength: the combination of intimidation, combined with his ability to enrich his followers by targeted public procurements and laws written to benefit them. With the EU money lost he will lose the power that used to bend backbones and some will not even remember they had ever supported Orbán. Others will be repulsed by the thought of supporting a weak politician (internationally) because the old authoritarian instinct to always vote for the strong will stop them.

As for the non-Orbánists, when the intimidation of power is gone, when fear is gone, they might be galvanized to vote against him. But that doesn't mean that Orbán can now be easily beaten. Not in his own election system. And any government that follows him might lose, even if they win, because they will not be able to govern.

In summary, it appears that Orbán's luck has run out. The economic cycle is at its end and he knows it – and the international scene also doesn't look up for him. And despite the all-time record election giveaway and the recent outsourcing of every last dime in the state coffers into loyalist asset management vehicles, Orbán might be vulnerable to something more subtle: the shuttering of his image of invincibility. It is no wonder that he looks concerned about what he calls "foreign interference" in the elections. It would prove to both his followers and his opponents that he is not invincible – and an entire army of anti-Orbán voters appears to wait for just that to go and cast their votes.

Shortly after the surprise defeat of Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš due to the Pandora scandal revealing details of his wealth, Orbán gave a speech at a national holiday that was all about the prospect of a similar "foreign interference" in the Hungarian elections.

He also talked about the evil opposition for the first time, switching from his old tactic of not mentioning them because they were so inconsequential. Orbán's campaign team followed suit and switched from never-ever mentioning the opposition to provoking fear of them. They still insist that the opposition is a joke - but Orbán envisioned a mighty western conspiracy behind

them. He talked exactly like his communist predecessors used to, bashing the imperialist West and blaming them for the country's woes.

Washington became prominent among the enemies who are attacking him. Even though the Biden-administration appears to have largely ignored him, the fall of his fellow strongmen due to corruption scandals in recent months has taken a toll on Orbán's nerves - and he blames it on Washington. It feels like he is preparing his followers that something might be leaked about his cabinet - and that it will be Washington's attack. The fact that former president Trump openly endorsed him or that Orbán himself was caught supporting the reelection of his allies on the Balkans are apparently not considered "foreign interference".

Orbán's wealth is an open secret as his family and friends live in ridiculous luxury they have amassed while he was in power. Although Orbán is officially penniless on paper, a revelation similar to what happened to Babiš in the Pandora papers would not be a factual surprise to anyone, not even to his followers. Some of them even expect a strongman to steal, and many can't imagine the world without self-dealing politicians.

But a leak (of anything) would do something worse for a strongman: it would show that he is not invincible. And authoritarian followers are repulsed by any sign of weakness.

There is also a debate on whether Orbán actually wants to win in 2022 – or would rather let the opposition drown under the weight of the economic crisis. If he plans to win, the all-time history record election giveaway is a proof of that. It is carefully targeted never to reach anyone who is poor or not a heterosexual, married couple with children. But it is huge nonetheless. It may serve to buy votes – as well as to empty the budget for his successor and it resulted in record high deficit. Many of the impacts of the poor economy, such as inflation and rate rises have been postponed until after the elections in the forms of temporary price controls on goods and mortgage rates, but it will bury whoever governs after April.

Orbán's all-time record election giveaway include:

- 13th month pension to be sent out in February,
- a one-off, lump sum pension bonus of HUF 80000 (sent in November),
- a Covid-induced general debt moratorium extended until next election,
- fuel price controls (that also served to play fuel stations into the hands of a crony and squeeze out foreign operators),

- the utility price control (since 2014), which also remains in place despite the price increase,
- 15+15% wage increase promised to academics after a decade of frozen wages,
- 21% to nurses,
- 10% to teachers,
- 20% to nursery workers,
- 10% promised to police,
- soldiers and policemen get a one-off payment worth 6 months of their salaries (only if they get vaccinated) in February 2022
- minimal wage increase by 20% to 550 euros (before taxes),
- families with children get their 2021 income taxes back in a lump sum before the 2022 elections,
- people under 25 won't have to pay income taxes,
- free money for home owners to renovate – causing price hikes and more price controls,
- tax cuts to companies (also serves to further starve opposition municipalities),
- Orbán unilaterally announced that mortgage interest rates will remain frozen at their October 2021 levels until after the elections (to temporarily detach 400k mortgage payers from the inevitable interest rate hikes, until after the elections). They will first pay a lower installment in February. Banks were not consulted, but they must send letters to every customer that they have Orbán to thank for it.
- Orbán personally announced that non-cash vouchers can be used to buy food, not just overpriced and unnecessary domestic holidays, from February 2022 until after the elections,
- price fixing of basic foods to be enacted in February.

Orbán even advertises this on his own, personal Facebook that is usually reserved to ooze statesmanship and being above politics.

Most of these measures have been timed to kick in in February 2022, eight weeks before elections. The question about the economy is whether the fresh memory of price fixing will leave him with deliriously grateful voters – or cause shortages and chaos just before polls open. The most heavy-handed measures expire after the elections, leaving any successor in a terrible situation.

The spending bonanza made a hole in the budget and brought on record-setting new debt but it is dismissed as economic stimulus for those who want to believe it. All this during massively overheating inflation that can be barely concealed by the official inflation statistics, kept low by legal price fixing.

It is important to remember that in 2018 pre-election giveaway used to be almost non-existent. Cash vouchers to the pensioners are part of tradition, those were duly sent. But the fact that impoverished rural voters could now be bought off with sacks of potatoes was even ridiculed.

The change of tactic between 2018 and 2022 is remarkable. The spending bonanza thus also raises the question: Can welfare populism (spending both on cronies and the general public) save an ailing autocrat, or does the thawing bring forth more discontent?

If fear and dependence are not sufficient any more and he needs to entice voters rather than intimidating them – does it mean the end of an era?

There is also a new enemy and campaign target for 2022: LGBT people.

Orbán's propaganda machine had been pivoting for enemies ever since he lost the municipal elections in late 2019. The topic of migrants as enemies has been exhausted by then, and even though it was not completely put to rest, it could no longer serve as the one-word election program it used to be. Orbán was ready to put the migrants as designated hate target to rest. Shortly before the pandemic a campaign has been prepared (complete with a direct mail campaign and a full-blown media offensive) against gypsies and judges. But then the pandemic came and Orbán reluctantly jumped on the bandwagon and started posing as savior.

After the vaccination campaign has stalled, however, he has distanced himself from the pandemic. It was not winnable and at any rate, as a virus is not the right kind of threat for an autocrat (because he didn't fabricate it, nor can he control it). Yes, the pandemic was used for other purposes, most notably to economically punish the enemy, to foster unchecked public procurement opportunities, to govern by decree and to dole out unheard of sums to loyalists. But it was not a good enemy for the elections.

Orbán needed a new enemy to gear up for the elections. First he introduced an enemy that once worked for him: Ferenc Gyurcsány, the pre-2009 prime minister. It was an old, old scapegoat but Orbán isn't young either and he is irresistibly pulled to things that once brought him success – especially at times of distress. For a while it seemed that the election will be fought against Gyurcsány (who wasn't even running) but then the Pegasus scandal happened and Orbán needed to improvise. He added homophobia in the shape of a referendum that informs voters that children are threatened by non-heterosexuals in various ways. The "child protection" law and the mobilization around it for a legally unnecessary referendum to take

place together with the general elections is a combination of two miracle weapons: a hate campaign and a referendum.

The Pegasus scandal has been unpleasant for the government but their control over the media helped to play down the scandal.⁸ At any rate, no one expected that it would be investigated. After a period of sheer silence and confusion among Fidesz politicians came the new directive. They all started telling that it was legal on every platform, domestic or otherwise. It was legal, they made it legal to eavesdrop and conduct surveillance on anyone, any time, without suspicion or without involving another branch of power, a judge.⁹ It is now enough for a minister to sign off on unlimited surveillance – and it is not clear what the consequences are if surveillance happens even without that signature (and someone figures it out and proves it).¹⁰

Since political responsibility is non-existent under Orbán, no one thought of even resigning for the scandal, not even when the minister excused herself stating that she let her deputy sign the surveillance warrants. (Her deputy later came under scrutiny for accepting bribes – an extremely high level scandal that could not be revealed without political permission – and everyone was wondering whether he was made the fall guy.) The details of who bought the

⁸ Curiously, even the majority of Fidesz voters disagreed with the surveillance of the opposition - but a big number of them finds it normal and probably soothing that the state should be able to hear and say anything - especially the internal dissenters. It has to do with the pre-1989 dictatorship when not only was state surveillance uncontrolled, but people were made to report on one another. It weakened the social fabric and rendered many people completely subservient to power, regardless of whether they perceive it as legitimate or even benevolent. Power is power – and that view makes an authoritarian follower.

⁹ Kim Lane Scheppele, expert on Hungarian constitutional law at CEU, wrote about it on Paul Krugman's blog in The New York Times in 2012. She was discussing Orbán's anti-terror unit and its apparent lack of oversight in conducting surveillance. "TEK can engage in secret surveillance without having to give reasons or having to get permission from anyone outside the cabinet. In an amendment to the police law passed in December 2010, TEK was made an official police agency and was given this jurisdiction to spy on anyone. TEK now has the legal power to secretly enter and search homes, engage in secret wiretapping, make audio and video recordings of people without their knowledge, secretly search mail and packages, and surreptitiously confiscate electronic data (for example, the content of computers and email). The searches never have to be disclosed to the person who is the target of the search – or to anyone else for that matter. In fact, as national security information, it may not be disclosed to anyone. There are no legal limits on how long this data can be kept. "... requests for secret surveillance are never reviewed by an independent branch of government. The justice minister approves the requests made by a secret police unit operated by the interior minister. Since both are in the same cabinet of the same government, they are both on the same political team." <https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/19/the-new-hungarian-secret-police/>

¹⁰ Apart from the opposition politicians, activists and journalist about whom an autocratic government wants to know everything anyway, Orbánist loyalists were also on the list of Pegasus targets. The new leadership of a national security organization eavesdropped on the old one and even the closest security guards of the president have been tapped.

software and how it was used has been made confidential for decades and the little we know is not coming from any official investigation.

But the confusion and the embarrassment put enough pressure on the campaign machine to improvise and thus Orbán threw in the issue of pedophiles – by which every Fidesz politician means homosexuals. In an attempt to transplant a Western public discourse into Hungarian politics (where the issue is not even present) every Orbánist suddenly started scaremongering about sex change operation performed on kindergarteners. Discourse about the “child protection” law doesn’t even bother to mention pedophiles – not least because the last incidents of convicted pedophiles were Fidesz politicians. They simply conflate homosexuality with pedophilia – the way the Russian info war machine teaches it.

The new enemy also comes with another thing Orbán fetishizes: a referendum. The general elections will now be held together with a referendum on whether Hungarians want sex-change operations to be promoted to children, and other loaded fake questions that really just serve to inform people about a threat that doesn’t even exist. Abroad it can be communicated as being part of the US culture wars – on Trump’s side.

The four possible outcomes of the 2022 elections

- Orbán wins with a 2/3 supermajority.
- Orbán wins but with only a simple majority.
- The opposition coalition wins with a simple majority.
- The opposition coalition wins with a 2/3 supermajority.

SCENARIO 1/4

Orbán wins again by a constitutional supermajority

As of December 2021 polls show a tight competition between the two sides.

Poll results heavily diverge according to the pollsters' party affiliation but the neutral ones show that the united opposition is a force that definitely endangers Orbán's precious 2/3, maybe even his majority. And if hiding and insofar passive voters turn up to vote, the numbers can be even worse for Orbán.

If a new Orbán supermajority materializes it is thus unlikely to have the same legitimacy as his previous ones, especially after the suspicious elections of 2018. For the first time since he came back to power there is a united opposition and if they get that much less than Fidesz, it can't be explained away easily.

In 2010 Orbán won by a 2/3 supermajority partly because his opponent lost that much. The combination of the fallout from the financial crisis and general incompetence, corruption and in-fighting on the then-government's side gave Orbán a gift that he didn't fail to use: a supermajority to change the entire legal system. This is what he means by one only has to win once, but it has to be big – his favorite lesson to his aspiring autocrat fanboys in other countries.

In 2014 he repeated the feat but with an even more Fidesz-friendly electoral system. While he had to ambush the private pension savings of Hungarians to pay off his supporters and buy their unquestioning loyalty after the 2010 victory, he now had the EU to finance his loyalty-building. His power was unquestioned and the opposition was without hope or spirit.

2018 has been different. Despite the even more jilted electoral law and all the unfairness built into the system the opposition had a slight chance.¹¹ Not for victory – because they were still fragmented and that is severely punished in this system – but to strip Orbán from his all-important 2/3 supermajority.

Having to govern with 50%+ would have forced Orbán to negotiate. To “do politics” again, as Orbánists put it. He could still just buy off opposition politicians to vote with Fidesz, but it would have been a major shift in the entire political atmosphere. That is why the 2/3 was the all-important goalpost for Orbán in 2018 and high participation was a really bad sign for him.

When an all-time high record participation rate emerged throughout the day, everyone in Fidesz panicked and went into hiding. The day before the elections everyone in Hungary would have sworn that the counting of the ballots would be clear – it is just that the system itself is a form of legal cheating. Opposition parties didn’t even bother to delegate observers in three quarter of the polling stations because everyone trusted the counting of the ballots. But by the time the day was out everyone was thinking the unthinkable – but no one dared to say it.

Even according to the official explanation of the events that day, it was the least competent and most suspicious election in Hungarian democratic history. When – after hours of an inexplicable news moratorium and the lowering of the participation rates after polls closed – Orbán emerged to announce his new 2/3 supermajority many simply didn’t believe it. He quickly gave a medal to the head of the election office, while their website was still down. Access to the records was withheld for a long time and even when they were given access, opposition “experts” had no clue what to look for or how it looked like.

The biggest ever opposition protests ensued – then fizzled out because not even their politicians dared to say it out loud. Accusing Orbán of cheating would undermine people’s

¹¹ Just a few weeks before the general elections Péter Márki-Zay won a shocking victory against Fidesz at the local mayoral byelections in the firmly pro-Fidesz town of Hódmezővásárhely. His miracle weapon: opposition coalition. The number of hiding opposition voters and first time voters went through the roof and it shocked Fidesz. But there were only weeks before the general elections and a similar opposition coalition was difficult to create nationwide.

willingness to vote. (When a year later Unhack Democracy Europe published its report¹² about the systemic fraud at the ballot count – as well as the electoral system – no one cared anymore.) But opposition parties are furiously recruiting election observers for each and every polling station for 2022 nonetheless.

A new Orbán supermajority would probably seal the fate of Hungary. It would cement Orbán as the figurehead and the role model for aspiring autocrats in the West. Depending on the international scene it might even lead to a breakup with the EU.

For Orbán, personally, the only use of the EU is its money – having received an avalanche of dumb money over the decade, comparable to the Marshall plan – and using it to buy loyalty. It showed all the sick incentives of international aid. Without the easy money Orbán's own loyalists would begin to feel disappointed and leave the boat and thus the EU would only be a thorn in Orbán's side.

Hungary's EU-membership may thus come under review by Orbán. A spokesman already denied that Hungary would leave but that was to be expected. Even the slightest hint that Orbán might be planning to leave the EU would lead to mass protests and him losing the elections.

The Hungarian public may be overwhelmingly pro-EU, but it doesn't matter much since there is no legal need for a referendum to leave the EU. On the other hand, Orbán might not be allowed to get rid of Brussels if he is still useful as a member of the EU for Russian and Chinese interests. His international alliances can hardly change at this point without losing face – or worse.

If Orbán wins with yet another supermajority, the economy will also collapse on him, and him only. It would weaken him tremendously. This would be the first time he would have to govern through economic hardship and he can't postpone the impact of inflation and the weak currency much longer, no matter how aggressive legal means he chooses. Price controls and legal interference in market processes would escalate and accelerate. Shortages would ensue and the discontent might bring people to the street, even Orbán voters.

This, however, could also happen to the opposition if they win in 2022.

¹² Fresh evidence of Hungary vote-rigging raises concerns of fraud in European elections (17 May 2019) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/breaking-fresh-evidence-hungary-vote-rigging-raises-concerns-fraud-european-elections/>

SCENARIO 2/4

Orbán wins by only a simple majority

If Hungary is still governable by a simple majority – it must be Orbán's.

By putting loyalists atop of the remaining independent institutions and appointing them for oddly long periods of time, Orbán has placed constitutional landmines in the path of any potential successor.

He had also outsourced all the economic might of the state into loyalist asset management vehicles to do as they please with them, including universities, theatres and major cultural institutions whose state support is still mandated by law nonetheless. The new, politically fattened oligarchy is also expected to obstruct any government that is not Orbán's and they now control entire economic sectors, telecommunication, utilities and big chunks of banking and retail.

A simple majority for Orbán is not an unlikely scenario. It would rob him of his most potent domestic tool – his voting machine – but only temporarily, given the unconditional support he can expect from the leaders of independent institutions. He could still navigate with the help of breakaway MPs from the opposition that is easily divided.

The opposition would protest in the streets, but those protests are non-violent and regularly fail to achieve anything as they are easily ignored.

The loss of his mighty two-third would also mean that Orbán's ego abroad would be subdued. Having a supermajority has been his favorite talking point in Brussels and beyond, blaming all his policies on the people's supposed will and rejecting criticism on that basis.

The real question is how he would handle the inevitable economic downturn and whether he could conceal it or blame it on someone else.

SCENARIO 3/4

Opposition alliance wins by simple majority

This is the scenario many are hoping for. A simple majority seems achievable. How they would cooperate and how they could govern without any legislative power and against the headwind of hostile institutions is anyone's question.

As of their political leanings the opposition would steer the country back into the Western alliances – as much as it is still possible, and depending on how much room for maneuver they would have. With big parts of the economy and institutions pitted against them an opposition majority will always have their hands tied – and learning about the confidential details of the Russian and Chinese deals might put them off from trying to backpedal.

A simple opposition majority would be quickly crushed under the double weight of a hostile institutional and economic environment and an economic crisis coming home to roost, complete with inflation, weakening currency and hundreds of thousands stuck in mortgages and exposed to any rate rise. Price controls would have to be undone but market conditions could not be reinstated that easily.

No wonder many speculate that this might be Orbán's preferred scenario. The economy would crush the lame duck opposition alliance and he would add pressure with his followers from the streets. He could return even before 2026 if he plays this hand right.

Would Orbán hand over power?

In December 2021 a government spokesman reassured us in an interview that Orbán would hand over power to the opposition if they won. In other words, we have come to the point where it has to be said.

Of course, the blame for the deterioration of democratic standards must be shared. Donald Trump's January 6 shenanigans are an obvious example of why such a question might even occur to someone. But ultimately it all comes down to Putin's success in the mental deterioration of the West, sowing divisions to the point where hysterical crowds see the other party of their country as a bigger threat than they see Russian influence operations. But the question remains whether Orbán would just accept negative election results.

Signs that point against a peaceful handover are numerous. It started long ago with Orbán's infamous 2002 announcement that "the nation can't be in opposition", by which he meant that Fidesz is the party of (ethnic) Hungarians. His men have been repeating the mantra ever since, including the House Speaker who regularly laments that people don't just vote to the "Hungarian" party even though Fidesz helpfully points itself out as such. According to this logic, people should vote based on birth and not based on ideas, let alone policy.

Mark Leonard and Jeremy Shapiro from the European Council of Foreign Relations predicted for 2022 that Orbán may remain in power despite losing the elections: *"Orbán's Fidesz party will lose the Hungarian election to a newly unified opposition – or so outside election observers will assert. But, despite that, Orbán will follow former US president Donald Trump's playbook by claiming that he won. And he will improve upon Trump's performance by actually remaining in power. This will create large street protests in Hungary and a crisis between Hungary and the EU."*¹³

They are not the only observers who wonder whether Hungary is past the point of peaceful power transitions. Many at home have asked themselves the same questions. Their concern is not mere paranoia. To illustrate the possibility of a contested election we should look at three incidents in the past that might give us a clue regarding Orbánists' present attitudes to democratic power transitions.

Orbán has been the uncontested leader of his own party, Fidesz, ever since the 1990s. His men enjoyed posing as independent politicians, the leaked US diplomatic cables testify to that, and that image was not against Orbán's interests either. But it was a false image and it was never tested because they never actually resisted him. The weakest he had ever been (still without challenger) was after he lost the elections (again) in 2006. He then made the fateful decision to bring politics to the streets and to brew a coordinated campaign around a leaked speech of the then prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány. Between the election in Spring 2006 and October

¹³ 2022: The road to recovery (again) 7 January 2022, ECFR <https://ecfr.eu/article/2022-the-road-to-recovery-again/>

the same year Orbán built up a coordinated outrage campaign (complete with activists with loudspeakers driving around Budapest and playing the most outrageous parts of the speech) and started to question the election results.

The infamous Budapest riots ensued and according to some reports the only reason he didn't join them personally is because his party leadership even considered opposing him if he did so. They didn't have to do it in the end, Orbán stayed away from the riots. Although Orbán's role in the riots is firmly denied and the football enthusiasts involved will always testify that they did it purely out of a sense of patriotic duty, a recent book by an investigative journalist reveals how Orbán made gestures to football fans before the riots which were not lost on them.¹⁴

So bringing politics to the streets has worked for him once and so did bashing Gyurcsány. When Orbán decided to base his 2022 campaign on Gyurcsány, a 15-year-old scare story, it was obvious that he is using a tool that once proved to be rewarding.¹⁵ Maybe bringing politics to the streets is also such a tool that once worked to strengthen his grip on power within his own party. And to illustrate how much he believes he was right: By 2021 he came to the point where he celebrated the events of 2006 – rather than the anti-Russian revolution of 1956, the revolution Hungarians normally celebrate on October 23.

Today he has even less resistance within his own party. The second, but even the third line of Fidesz politicians have been sidelined. Those who surround him these days are political lightweights on their own right and many are proudly ignorant of the democratic norms they spurn. They may leave Orbán's side in case of an election defeat if they are not too deeply incriminated but they can't threaten to rebel against him like the 2006 leadership did. If Orbán wants to use his tried and tested method, if he gets the admiration of his illiberal allies from abroad, from Trump to Salvini to Putin, if he chooses to contest the results on the streets or to refuse to accept the count – what exactly can anyone do about it? This should be the question anyone asks when pondering what an autocrat can or cannot do: what would be the consequences for him, personally.

The second incident is more recent and it is a clue that even Orbán's men aren't sure whether they should ever hand over power again. In March 2019 Hungary was deep in the throat of Orbánism, legally as well as mentally. Orbán's loyalists were under the impression that the opposition is so illegitimate, so obviously traitors, that allowing them to exist is an act of generosity and inexplicable mercy. At any rate, they can not get power back, ever, and

¹⁴ Győzelmi kényszer - Futball és hatalom Orbán világában by Rényi Pál Dániel (Magyar Jeti Zrt, Budapest, 2021)

¹⁵ He keeps doing that with referendums, another tool that worked for him splendidly once. We will have a referendum about LGBT people together with the general elections in April.

Orbánists were past the point of pretending (domestically) that this is still a democracy. And they weren't alone with that view, the opposition also felt illegitimate to themselves.

In this mental fog an anomaly has happened. In the town of Szombathely Fidesz has lost its majority in the local council. (Not to an election but by alienating a loyalist who swapped sides.) Shocked and confused as to how to act in such a situation the local Fidesz representatives locked themselves in the meeting room in panic, blocking the door with a potted plant. According to the live feed on nyugat.hu they have been waiting for their Fidesz MP (and thus the local Orbánist strongman) to arrive from Budapest to tell them what to do.¹⁶ Such was the mental state of the country in 2019.

But the thick ice of Orbánism has already begun to crack. The 2019 municipal elections were a shock to the country – and to Orbánists – because half the major cities went to the opposition. And no one saw it coming. After the elections, however, the same question was raised: will Orbánist mayors really just stand up and leave if they lost? With all the contracts and evidence left behind in their offices? They were so certain of their victory that some of them were planning to go on a holiday the day after the elections. The possibility of handing over the office was never on their minds.

There were more than one districts and cities where such a smooth and self-evident transition didn't happen. Either because contracts and evidence have been removed or because the entire local administration resigned en masse – just to avoid working for a non-Orbánist mayor.

On one occasion, Orbánists' outrage at the opposition victory was publicized: they rejected the position of deputy mayor because they refused to “do politics” with the opposition again. In other words they have considered themselves beyond politics, i.e. beyond the point where they would hand over power just because some voters voted against them. They were firmly under the impression that Orbán can and would make sure the opposition is not allowed to win anymore. They can play elections but not with a chance to lose them.

Fear of physical violence against the opposition has not been an issue under Orbán. And the military has not been on anyone's mind until recently. They have not played a role in Hungarian politics since the regime change in 1989. If anything, analysts concerned themselves with Orbán's Anti-Terror Center (TEK), a well-financed organization that didn't appear to be under

¹⁶ Fideszen kívüli többség, időhúzás, migránsozás a szombathelyi közgyűlésen (February 28, 2019)
https://www.nyugat.hu/cikk/szombathelyi_kozgyules_2019_februar_percrol_percre

any kind of jurisdiction apart from their minister – but who amassed increasingly broad, virtually unlimited powers of surveillance as early as 2011.¹⁷ (The Pegasus scandal finally brought some attention to the limitless surveillance power of the state, but to little effect.)

Until February 2020, TEK would have been everyone's first guess when asked if Orbán's autocracy could ever turn to violence – but even that possibility was dismissed based on the fact that they haven't been known to be used for the purpose of political violence yet.

But in February 2020 the military appeared on the political scene. Military leaders appeared at Orbán's annual speech, a party event, in full uniform. Their presence there has been widely publicized. It is illegal for them to appear at party events in professional capacity, but there is no prosecution to investigate it. The media immediately started wondering what this unusual sight must mean.

The easiest explanation was that Orbán merely got a new whisperer. As his son graduated from a Hungarian military academy at first and then from Sandhurst, the proud father's interest could have been captured by military men. A new, Orbán-friendly loyalist has been appointed and money and new toys were being lavished on the boys. But the sight was still new to Hungarian politics and some have been worried that it might be a sign that Orbán will need armed help after the elections. And as police is short-staffed, underpaid and disillusioned (many of them only serve because they are not allowed to resign at the moment), Orbán had to find another ally to restore order in case of a post-election unrest.

Can the constitution be changed with a simple majority?

There are two issues that keep non-Orbánists up at night: Whether Orbán's self-cementing basic law can be replaced without a 2/3 supermajority and whether it would create a

¹⁷ Kim Lane Scheppele, expert on Hungarian constitutional law at CEU, wrote about it on Paul Krugman's blog in The New York Times in 2012. "TEK is now the sort of secret police that any authoritarian ruler would love to have. Its powers have been added slowly but surely through a series of amendments to the police laws, pushed through the Parliament at times when it was passing hundreds of new laws and when most people, myself included, did not notice. ... "TEK can engage in secret surveillance without having to give reasons or having to get permission from anyone outside the cabinet... the requests made by a secret police unit operated by the interior minister. Since both are in the same cabinet of the same government, they are both on the same political team. ... "...TEK's legal status is blurry, as some parts of its activities are authorized under the police law and others parts are authorized under the national security law. ... "Moreover, TEK seems to have some powers that exceed those of both police and national security agencies, particularly in its ability to avoid judicial warrants. No other agency in the Hungarian government has both police and national security powers, and it is unclear precisely how the agency is accountable – for which functions, under what standards and to whom."

<https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/19/the-new-hungarian-secret-police/>

“dangerous precedent” to hold Fidesz politicians and cronies accountable for corruption after they left office.

The answer to the latter is that they are perhaps looking at precedents from the wrong angle. After all, pre-1989 communist cronies have got away with their wealth and influence intact – and that created an equally dangerous precedent for today’s politicians. It might be the reason they chose the path of corruption: because their predecessors ran free with their own ill-gotten wealth and they expect the same to happen. It would create a new, nouveau riche, de facto aristocracy in Hungary (they have often refer to themselves as such) with bottomless wealth and influence over future governments.

The parallels with the post-1989 privatization are especially valid as the last year of outsourcing public wealth and assets into private hands is comparable to the post-1989 privatization in volume – it is just even less accountable and less advantageous for the state and the public. There is no reason that the men who manage this wealth would interfere less with politics than their communist predecessors did after the regime change.

As of the new constitution, it is a more difficult matter. Everything Orbán ever does is technically legal, thanks to his disciplined supermajority. But this is the moment when legality and legitimacy should be separately defined as they don’t always coincide. By this logic anything can be written into law, even total surveillance without oversight. The law makes it legal – but not necessarily legitimate or democratic.

The bitter feud between legal scholars about the possibility and legal philosophy underpinnings of a simple majority constitution replacing Orbán’s supermajority Basic Law is unsurprising. Some argue on the basis of previous constitutions and how those were enacted, some argue from political, other from legal philosophy point of view. There are plenty who fret that a simple majority constitution would cause a rift – and they are likely to make sure it happens. Whichever camp wins, either legal continuity or the country’s governability will suffer a blow.

Of course, the opposition might also win by a supermajority.

SCENARIO 4/4

Opposition alliance wins by a 2/3 supermajority

There isn't even talk about the possibility of a full-blown opposition triumph – but there should be. At the very least this scenario highlights the nature of the opposition and even Hungary's path ahead after Orbán.

If an opposition supermajority happens, it will be because of hiding voters. The last twelve years have made anti-government voters a hundred times more careful. Voters hiding their sympathies are not new but Hungarians have experienced an army of fake pollsters (on top of the obviously pro-government ones) with suspiciously good databases and loaded “questions” that are designed to manipulate instead of asking questions. Telling any pollster that one doesn't wish to vote for Orbán runs the risk of getting onto a list.

The other reasons for a landslide victory for the opposition alliance could be a well-timed and targeted scandal before the elections (what Orbán and his men are referring to as “foreign interference”). If the scandal hits Orbán's person, like a revelation about his private wealth, it will surprise no one, but it will send the message that he is no longer the strongest one and he is not untouchable. It would repel his followers and galvanize the opposition. A similar erosion of Orbánist voters would take place if the public got proof that Orbán is planning to leave the EU.

An opposition supermajority might also happen due to Orbán's self-dealing electoral law. It has a magnifying effect that propels a party with a mere plurality of the votes into the realm of a constitutional supermajority in parliament. But since the opposition was forced to unify, something Orbán also thought was not possible, this magnifying effect might begin to work against him. But it is not expected to happen in the view of the jilted advertising and media environment and with over a million new citizens in neighboring countries who are expected to vote for Orbán.

But if the balance tips over, it may inadvertently start to benefit his opponents. A little over 40% of the votes is enough for a two-third supermajority as long as it goes to a monolithic political entity – rather than a fragmented coalition. The election law punishes small parties and pushes the party system towards bipolarism so hard, it is a miracle they haven't teamed up yet for a two-party showdown. (Orbán has also worked on it, having mastered the so called salami-tactic against parties in the 90s, when he created a unified pole in the party system.) This might be the reason Fidesz is building up opposition entities and they created a legal opportunity and incentives for scores of fake parties to appear on the ballot sheet.

Even with a supermajority, the opposition would be an uneasy alliance of multiple parties.

The reason behind the opposition's failure to unite can be found in Fidesz' interference in opposition politics as well as opposition politicians' general incompetence and self-defeating stupidity. Also, because the opposition is still thinking in the old paradigm when one has to appeal to voters (rather than just manipulating and intimidating them), publish programs (rather than just hate targets) and deal with policies (rather than an in-the-long-run-we-are-all-dead kleptocracy).

If their primaries and the aftermath is any guide to their behavior, the opposition alliance will start falling apart the day after their victory, starting with the rift between the extreme right Jobbik (that basically agrees with all of Orbán's policies minus the corruption) and the rest. Winning a supermajority would most definitely go to their heads and hungry in-fighting would commence. At the very least, these people are hungry for status and positions after a decade languishing in Orbán's hell designed for them: where not even private sector success was allowed to those who didn't align. Not that politicians have any marketable skills for the real private sector, they are mostly just hired to pull in taxpayer money or influence legislation (the latter only in non-autocracies where legislation matters).

The coalition would probably last long enough, however, to vote out Orbán's basic law, and maybe even long enough to agree on something else to replace it with, a new constitution. It would also very likely contain several checks on the ruling power – a thing Orbán removed – because they don't trust each other. And that is a good thing. They would also be willing to launch investigations into a few cronies and their ill-gotten wealth.

Revenge is also a strong possibility and the general prosecutor would be quickly replaced. With him, the only thing that stood between Fidesz politicians and prosecution would be removed. Whether it means that there would be genuine investigations – or that oligarchs would have to buy their freedoms from the opposition – remains to be seen.

Beyond that, the opposition coalition is unlikely to move in lockstep and vote together on every issue like Orbán's militant supermajority does. Instead, endless policy debates would ensue. Which is to say, democracy would ensue. After experiencing the damaging effect of a militant supermajority without internal debates (at least not on policy) one must appreciate the way debating parties keep each other in check. Which is to say they are slow and less "effective". But Hungary should put the cult of effectiveness to the rest. It is a synonym for strongmen and autocracy. A continuously debating coalition would not only be a welcome development, it may be necessary for an entire generation to be able to see democratic politics for the first time.

The biggest story is what would happen to Fidesz if a supermajority for the opposition would materialize (if it would be allowed to happen). Would protests be likely?

The chance of Fidesz politicians supporting violent protests would be lower due to higher legitimacy of the opposition triumph – but only among those who 1) believe the results and/or 2) still care about election results. The militant core of Orbánist sympathizers would refuse to believe any result that is not to their liking – or pretend they don't believe it because they really don't care. If the events of the autumn of 2006 are any guide – and those are promoted and lionized by Orbán at every turn – there could be violent protests denying the election results.

Orbán's position within his party would probably remain solid – if there was no contest before 2010, there shouldn't be any now. At any rate, all the old, big names are now sidelined, only Orbán remained from the old generation. Behind him there are only weightless executioners. A few names regularly emerge as potential successors but without a major blow to Orbán's person they couldn't take over the party.¹⁸ Orbán would easily return in four years, even if the opposition would now win.

¹⁸ Even if Orbán disappeared they could not keep the party together any longer and there would be a rearrangement on the “political right” (a misnomer in this case).

About the author:

Eszter Nova, PhD, is a lecturer at Cevro Institute in Prague.

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