



THE PROSPECTS OF GREEN-LEFT POLITICS IN HUNGARY

RESEARCH SUMMARY

AUTHORS: ANDRÁS BÍRÓ-NAGY – GERGELY LAKI – ÁRON SZÁSZI

OCTOBER 2020

This study aims to present the opportunities for green-left politics in the following years in Hungary, especially in the context of the ongoing economic and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides revealing the societal problems Hungarians have been the most concerned about during the coronavirus crisis, this joint research of Policy Solutions and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung also gives an overview of the public perception of the Hungarian government's climate policy as well as some key green and left-wing policies. Furthermore, our results also show whether it is the government or rather the opposition which is considered to be more credible regarding various societal issues by the Hungarian public.

The research is based on an opinion poll conducted by Závecz Research. 1000 people – representing the whole adult population of Hungary by age, gender, residency and education – were interviewed personally at the beginning of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, between 5 and 19 August 2020.

The problem map of Hungarians during the COVID-19 crisis: healthcare, wages, and living expenses

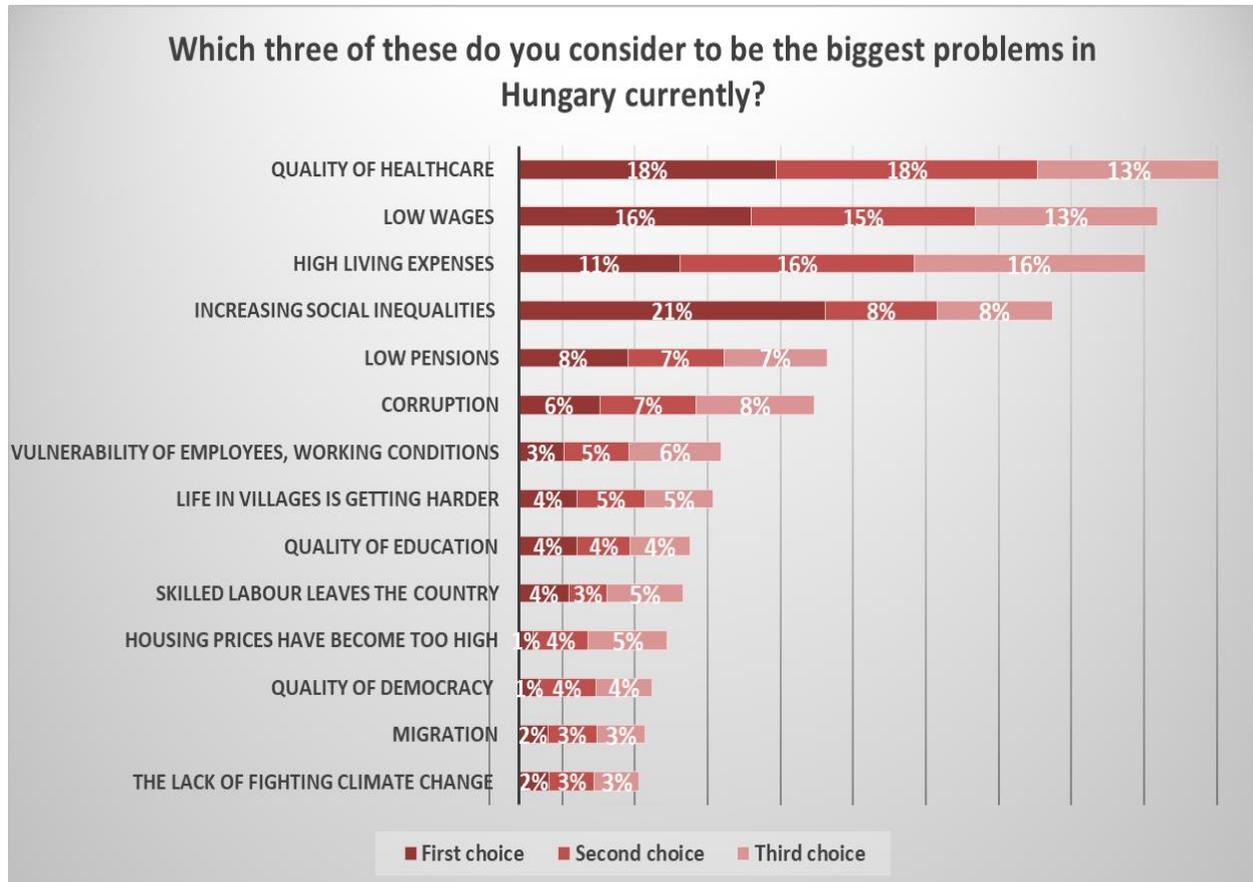
Half a year after the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, Hungarians regard the quality of healthcare, low wages and excessively high living expenses as the biggest challenges facing the country (see Graph 1). Almost half of the respondents (49%) named healthcare, and nearly a fifth of the respondents ranked it first. Not far behind, 44% of respondents ranked the issue of low wages second. **The depth of the social crisis caused by the coronavirus is well indicated by the problem map of Hungarians as concerns about living expenses grew the most out of those listed.** A year ago, only 20% of Hungarians ranked excessively high living expenses among the country's three most significant problems – this proportion reached 43% at the second wave of the corona pandemic. Consequently, the cost of living after being ranked sixth in 2019 is already the third most prominent problem in the eyes of Hungarians.

Socio-economic issues showed a stronger dominance than before as similar topics are in fourth and fifth place: growing social inequalities (37%) as well as the issue of low pensions (22%). In contrast, corruption, ranked fourth in 2019, now ranks in sixth place with 21%; nonetheless, it remains as a popular topic among the committed opposition voters. Among the most mentioned problems, corruption ranked second (43%) for left-liberal Democratic Coalition (DK) voters, third (46%) for liberal Momentum voters, fifth (33%) for radical right Jobbik supporters and sixth for Socialist Party (MSZP) voters.

During the coronavirus crisis, the state of democracy and concerns about climate change were at the bottom of the list, mentioned by less than 10% of respondents. A more surprising development is that the government's intensive anti-migration communication campaign over the years has not resulted in as much of a dominant impact on the problem map of Hungarians as before. At the beginning of the second wave of the coronavirus crisis, solely 8% of respondents ranked migration among the country's three most important problems. The issue of immigration remained relatively

important for pro-government voters, ranking sixth among their problems. Among opposition voters however, migration was the least frequently mentioned problem.

Graph 1. The biggest problems in Hungary during the COVID-19 crisis



There is an apparent difference between the views of younger and older age groups about pensions, wages and education. The problem of the low level of pensions is the most frequently mentioned concern (58%) for those above the age of 60, and the least common (4%) concern among those aged 18-29. The younger respondents ranked the issue of low wages first (51%), while the elderly ranked it fifth (27%). Every fifth young person mentioned the low standard of education, while it was last on the list for the elderly (4%).

There are also many differences between the problems perceived by those people with the lowest and highest levels of education. For graduates, corruption is the fifth (23%), education the sixth (16 %) and environmental protection the ninth (12%) most popular topic. For citizens with the lowest levels of education, these topics rank ninth (9%), eleventh (6%) and last (3%). In contrast, for them, the difficulty of rural living ranks sixth (18%) which is at the bottom (5%) of the list for graduates. **The most significant difference between the people of Budapest and those living in the villages can be seen in the frequency of mentioning high house prices and the difficulties of rural living.** Housing difficulties were mentioned by 14% of Budapest residents (ninth on the list) but by only 5% of those

living in villages (last on the list). The problems of rural settlements are evidently one of the essential issues for those living in the villages; it ranked as the fifth most important issue (29%) while it was last on the list (2%) in Budapest.

Altogether, the problems considered important by the respondents show that people are primarily concerned with issues that affect their direct livelihood in 2020.

Substantial support behind green issues, but Hungarians would not pay more for green products

The high social support for green policy proposals indicates that, in principle, there are no particular obstacles to a green turn. Still, the crisis is not conducive to making these issues the centre of attention. The strong potential for the future in prioritising environmental aspects and moving towards climate neutrality can be clearly seen from the almost unanimous support for a switch to renewable energy sources (92%), energy-efficient building renovations (94%), higher taxation for polluting companies (89%), and reducing the rate of VAT on organic food products (85%).

Although slightly more modest, there are still highly popular initiatives such as introducing a ban on the circulation of old and notably polluting cars (70%), environmental taxation of air travel (70%), and a carbon tax (54%). At the same time, we also analysed the popularity of green, responsible consumer behaviour. We asked the research participants whether they would be willing to pay more for a product if it was undoubtedly produced in an environmentally friendly way. This question resulted in the lowest rate of positive response among the answers given to climate change and environmental pollution. **The majority of respondents (57%) would not spend more money on green products; only 35% would pay more for them. The results showed, therefore, that the realisation of green objectives is not primarily seen by most people through changing their consumption habits.**

The consumption preferences of Momentum voters significantly differ from the supporters of other parties. **Among parties above 5%, the voters of Momentum are the only political group where the majority are those who would pay even more for green products (56%) than those who are not willing to do so (40%).** In Budapest alone, there is a majority of those who would pay more for environmentally friendly products (48% vs. 41%). In other types of settlement, the proportion of answers would be one third for yes and 60% for no. The breakdown of education background shows a significant upward trend in this question, as moving towards higher education categories, the proportion of yes increases and of no decreases. **While only 16% of citizens with the lowest education would spend more money on green products and 80% of them would not, whereas the majority of graduates (58%) would be willing to pay for them, and only 34% responded that they would not spend more for such purposes.**

Government climate policy and PAKS 2: the politicised green issues are more divisive

As green issues become politicised, the pro-government and opposition dimension determines the distribution of public opinion. In general, pro-government and opposition voters were both in favour of measures aimed at a more ambitious green policy. This, however, was overpowered by party preference when the climate policy of the government had to be evaluated. **There was a relative majority of respondents who said the climate policy of the Orbán government was unsatisfactory (47%), but satisfied respondents (44%) were not far behind.** Three-quarters of Fidesz-KDNP supporters were satisfied with the green policy of the government, but every fifth Fidesz voter belongs to the critical group. However, the majority of opposition voters and undecided voters are dissatisfied.

The opinions on stopping the expansion of Paks nuclear power plant were also split along political fault lines. The absolute majority of respondents (57%) agreed that the expansion of the nuclear power plant should be stopped, but here too, there was a definite difference between pro-government and opposition respondents. Stopping the investment was very popular in all opposition camps. The proportion of respondents supporting the cancellation and continuation of the project respectively was 82%-10% among Jobbik voters, 78%-9% among DK voters, 76%-19% among Momentum voters, 68%-29% among MSZP voters, and the majority of undecided voters agreed with the opposition camps (59%-21%). In contrast, the majority of Fidesz-KDNP supporters (51%) do not agree with stopping the expansion. It is worth noting that the proportion of opponents is hardly much less: **40% of Fidesz-KDNP supporters would halt one of the government's largest public investments.**

Green policies are the most popular in Budapest and among young people

In the capital, people were the most dissatisfied with the green policy of the government (56%), and almost all of the environmental measures proposed are more popular in Budapest than any other type of settlement. 92% of Budapest residents support the reduced rate of VAT on organic food-products, 82% would ban old and polluting cars, 72% support a carbon tax, and 63% would halt the expansion of Paks. Also in Budapest, most people are willing to pay a higher price for environmentally friendly products (48%).

In addition to those living in the capital, environmentally friendly attitudes are much stronger among young people. Compared to those above the age of 60, the 18-29 age group is ten percentage points more dissatisfied with the current green policy (52%), ten points more in favour of a carbon tax (56%), nine points more in favour of stopping the Paks-2 expansion, and five points more in favour of assisting in the switch for renewable energy sources (96%). Also, a higher than average proportion of the 18-29 age group would pay more for the extra costs of environmentally friendly products (40%), 13 percentage points more than those above 60.

Outstanding support behind left-wing economic policy demands

The economic crisis in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic has further highlighted social problems and the left-wing public policy responses to them. **Altogether, based on our results, it can be stated that Hungarian voters are clearly open to left-wing economic policy demands.** On questions that examined the critical themes of left-wing economic policy, the social democratic perspective took a large majority: regardless of gender, age, education background, type of settlement, the vast majority are in favour of progressive economic policy measures.

The vast majority of Hungarian society (82%) agrees with the statement that the state must reduce inequalities with society. In contrast, only 15% of respondents would entrust this issue to market processes, which means that Hungarians definitely expect state-led economic and social policy from the government, which prioritises improving the circumstances of lower social classes. There is almost a complete agreement (89-95%) in all opposition camps that reducing inequalities is a priority duty for the state. There are diverging opinions among pro-government voters on this issue: 72% of Fidesz voters agree with left-wing stance, but every fourth pro-government sympathiser believes that everyone is responsible for their own social circumstance. **More than three-quarters of the Hungarian society (78%) also support the introduction of a progressive tax system,** while only every fifth Hungarian agrees with the view of the Orbán government that flat-rate taxation is the most just form of social burden-sharing. **There is a social consensus on the issue of taxation of enormous wealth:** only 8% of the respondents said there is no need to tax tremendous wealth, while 88% agree with that "the rich should pay."

Nearly three-quarters of Hungarians (73 %) support the introduction of a basic income, while only every fourth respondent (23 %) opposes the introduction of this measure – according to them, it is not the duty of the state to provide everyone with the minimum subsistence level. **The results measured during the social and economic crisis caused by the coronavirus indicate a six percent increase in basic income support compared to our 2018 research** (two years ago 67% agreed with the principle of basic income). There is a definitive majority of supporters of basic income in all political camps, but again we can observe a difference between pro-government and opposition voters. Fidesz supporters have the highest (32%) rejection of a state-aided minimum subsistence level, while 63% of them support the introduction of a basic income – which is also striking because the representatives of governing parties have repeatedly and firmly kept away from the domestic introduction of the measure. **On the other hand, the sympathisers of all opposition parties favoured the introduction of the measure, and the support for the policy demanded by Párbeszéd (Dialogue) is vital in all opposition camps.** It is also a popular initiative among the undecided voters: 76% of them are in favour of a basic income.

Only around every fourth Hungarian considers the current regulation of jobseekers' assistance to be right: 26% of the respondents believe that the length of the unemployment benefits should not be extended, while **70% of Hungarians believe that the state should provide unemployment benefits for a longer time for those who lost their jobs. This is a significant change from our 2018 data: instead of 54% at the time, 16 percentage points more people believe that three months unemployment benefits is not enough**

during the coronavirus crisis. Education background is clearly correlated with the answers provided to the question; the less qualified citizens are increasingly in favour of extending the eligibility period. 77% of citizens with primary education, and 60% of graduates, favour the extension, which is related to the fact that less educated citizens are more affected by unemployment.

Nearly two-thirds of Hungarians (64%) would make the housing subsidy scheme available only to those who cannot buy their home on their own, while only one-third of the society (32%) agrees with the current housing policy of the government, according to which everyone is entitled to housing benefits regardless of their socioeconomic status. A majority of supporters of all political parties oppose the current housing subsidy scheme, but pro-government voters are significantly divided over this issue: 55% of them would withdraw housing allowance from those who can buy a home on their own, while 41% agreed that the state should include everyone equally in the housing subsidy scheme. Among the opposition camp, however, the rejection rate of the housing subsidy of the Orbán government is already higher. Mostly, the voters of MSZP (74%) wish to narrow down the circle of those entitled to it, while the voters of Momentum are the most likely to accept the current scheme, but even they reject it by two-thirds (65%).

Identity politics: gender equality, bridging the gap for Roma, and same-sex marriage

The vast majority of Hungarians support the principle of equal pay for equal work: 87% of respondents agreed with the statement that it is unjust if women earn less for the same work than men. In contrast, every tenth respondent said that the pay gap between women and men is not a problem. Unlike most other issues, party preference does not affect opinions as 84-90% of all political camps reject gender-based discrimination regarding wages. However, there are significant differences in the breakdown by gender: women consider the pay gap to be unjust by 12 percentage points more (92%-80%), but even four out of five men share the principle that women should not be paid less for the same work than men.

The Hungarian public is sensitive not only to the gender pay gap but also to the issue of violence against women. The majority of Hungarians (68%) think it is essential to talk about the issue of violence against women, and only every fourth respondent did not consider it as a vital issue and thought that violence against women receives too much attention.

At the same time, Hungarian society is divided on the issue of bridging the gap for Roma communities. Precisely the same number of people share the view that the well-being of our Roma compatriots should be given high priority support as those who think that bridging the gap for Roma should not receive particular attention (48%-48%). This even perception is a significant change from our 2018 results when only 36% thought that bridging the gap for Roma should be given high priority support, whereas 56% believed it was not necessary. Party preferences significantly dominate the opinions: although the view of pro-government voters does not differ from the average



perspective, voters of Jobbik, despite the party's turn towards becoming a people's party, are more averse to bridging the gap for Roma (only 43% of them agreed with the statement, while 55% think Roma communities should not receive particular support). However, the position of Jobbik supporters have softened in two years: 72% of them rejected the statement in 2018. The MSZP camp is most favourable to making a particular integration effort; 60% of them agreed with the statement, but DK (50% vs. 41%) and Momentum (57% vs. 43%) camps also had a majority progressive viewpoint.

Hungarian society takes a somewhat averse position on the issue of same-sex marriage. 58% of respondents insisted that the institution of marriage should not include same-sex couples, while slightly more than a third (35%) would liberalise the institution of marriage. Interestingly, the situation four years ago was practically the same as it is now, which indicates that the opinions of citizens are relatively stable regarding this issue. **Pro-government voters are the most averse on this issue; two-thirds (65%) would not extend the institution of marriage to same-sex couples,** besides almost every second Fidesz voter (46%) firmly rejects the proposal. Apart from them, only in the Jobbik camp, there was a majority of averse positions (57% vs. 32%). **The DK camp is considered to be the most open (52% would allow gay marriage, 40 % would not allow it), while the two camps are evenly balanced among MSZP and Momentum voters.**

Altogether it can be clearly said that Hungarians are much less progressive in identity politics than economic policy issues. Concerning the issue of gender equality – at least regarding the examined dimensions – Hungarian society seems to be relatively open. Looking at the future of Hungarian Roma communities, Hungarians are divided on the level of state involvement needed in bridging the gap for them. Regarding the issue of same-sex marriage, Hungarian society still remains more conservative. However, it is perhaps surprising that support for same-sex marriage is stagnant despite years of negative comments from pro-government media.

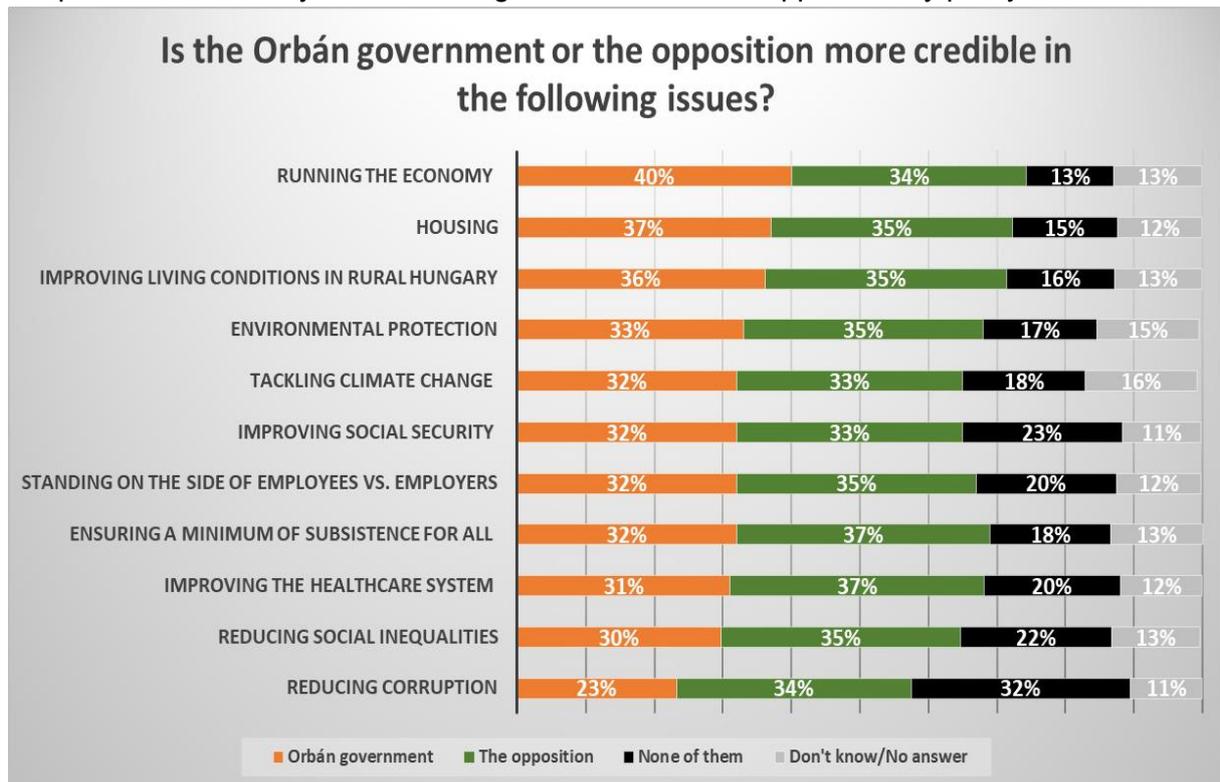
The key to the credibility of Orbán government: economic legitimacy among its voters

In the final part of our research, we assessed whether Hungarians consider the government or the opposition to be more credible in relation to various issues and policies (Graph 2). **The Orbán government is seen to be most credible in ensuring economic development (40%), the area of housing policy (36%), and improving rural living conditions (36%).** These are the three areas in which the government dominates over the united opposition. However, the government only has an advantage over the margin of error (6 percentage points) in the field of economic policy.

The opposition dominates on the issue of the fight against corruption: 34% regard the opposition more credible, 11 percentage points more than Fidesz. Issues favourable to the opposition are corruption, then healthcare (37%, 6 percentage points advantage), ensuring minimum subsistence (37%, 5 percentage points advantage), and reducing inequalities (35%, 5 advantage points). Although within the margin of error (1-3 percentage points), respondents consider the opposition to be slightly more credible in

matters of environmental protection, climate policy, the creation of social security, and protection of workers. **It is essential to add that concerning the credibility of the government and the opposition, in general, two-thirds of the respondents were able to form an opinion on a side, while one-third of them did not consider either of them credible or were unable to answer the question of credibility.**

Graph 2. The credibility of the Orbán government and the opposition by policy areas



The pro-government and opposition fault line thoroughly explains which side respondents find more credible. Taking all topics into account, 71% of the pro-government voters find the Orbán government more credible, compared to 3-8% among the opposition parties. **Among the pro-government voters, the credibility of Orbán-government mainly derives from the matter of ensuring economic development (83%) – this finding is in line with the results of our "Orbán10" research in the spring of 2020 which confirmed the importance of the economic legitimacy of Fidesz in the eyes of their voters.**

At the same time, half of Fidesz voters think that corruption is the weak point of the party: only 52% of the pro-government voters consider the government more credible than the opposition in this matter. Among the opposition voters, the differences in perceptions of credibility vary between the supporters of the individual parties that make up the opposition. **MSZP voters tended to have the best opinion on the credibility of the opposition coalition, with DK voters following them, Momentum voters a little less enthusiastic, and the largest number of sceptics among Jobbik supporters.** However, even seven out ten Jobbik voters consider the opposition more credible than the Orbán government. Among

undecided voters, 16% find the government more credible, and 22% find the opposition more credible – the passivity of the undecided can be explained by the fact that almost two-thirds of them see neither side as credible.

It can also be generally stated that the majority of those with a primary education consider the government more credible while graduates see the opposition as more credible. The average credibility of the government and the opposition is 36%-27% among citizens with the lowest education and 34%-39% among graduates. Citizens with a primary education consider the opposition the most credible in representing workers and reducing inequalities (30-30%). In this same group, the government is regarded as the most credible in promoting economic development (45%) and housing (43%) and improving rural life (41%). According to graduates, the credibility of the opposition is most pronounced in terms of healthcare (43%), environmental protection (42%), social housing policy (41%) and ensuring the minimum subsistence (41%). They consider the Orbán government the most credible in the field of economic policy.

In both the youngest and the oldest age groups, there is a small majority of those who consider the opposition more credible on most of the issues. In the 18-29 age group, the credibility of the opposition was the highest in the fight against corruption (37%), then not far behind in the reduction of inequality, improving rural life, and ensuring just housing policy (36% each). According to the oldest, the credibility of the opposition is the highest in matters of representing workers' interests (40%), reduction of inequality, and ensuring minimum subsistence (39%-39%). In the 18-29 age group, the credibility of the Orbán government peaked in areas of economic development and improving rural life (34%-34%). Among the over 60s, the most credible affairs of the government overlap with those of young people: economic development (40%), improving rural life (38%) and a just housing policy (39%) are the most prominent.

The credibility rates significantly differ between Budapest and the villages. In the capital the opposition leads, and in the villages the government. In Budapest, the most credible issues of the opposition are healthcare (48%), improving rural life and reducing inequalities (47%-47%). In villages, these are ensuring the minimum subsistence (35%), fighting against corruption and protecting workers (32%-32%). **The clear difference between Budapest and the rural areas can be clearly seen in relation to the credibility of green issues as well:** among the residents of Budapest, the opposition leads the Orbán government by 10 percentage points (43% vs. 33%) in the fight against climate change, while in the villages the government leads by 11 percentage points (36% vs. 25%). **Taking everything into account, it can be stated that the belief in economic policy competence dominates everything for the Orbán government for the time being: the most credible issue for the government is ensuring economic development in villages (44%) as well as in Budapest (37%).**

Overall, green issues and climate-conscious policy in general are considered popular and offer great opportunities for political forces with such a profile in the long run. However, the social problems caused by the protracted economic crisis, already after the first wave of coronavirus, shifted the focus towards left-wing policy. This tendency is expected to continue into the next year. The Orbán government overcame the first

wave of the pandemic without compromising its perception of its economic policy competence. Presumably, a significant proportion of people have blamed the virus, and not the government so far, even for their deteriorating individual situation, job losses, or declining incomes. This aspect also explains how the continued high support for Fidesz separated from the consumer confidence index – the latter dramatically collapsed during the first wave of the pandemic, then after a three month-rise, it deteriorated again in August and September. Nonetheless, the protracted crisis as a consequence of the second wave of the pandemic will probably be the real test of economic and social crisis management of Fidesz. A crucial issue for the 2022 election is whether the Orbán government can maintain the belief that it can manage the economy even in persistently difficult economic circumstances. At the same time, the crisis offers an opportunity for the opposition to provide a more socially sensitive crisis management alternative than the government, and to convince voters that under their leadership it would build a more just and sustainable country.

About the authors

András Bíró-Nagy is Director of Policy Solutions. He is also Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Social Sciences (TK PTI), and Board Member of the Hungarian Political Science Association.

Gergely Laki is political analyst at Policy Solutions.

Áron Szászi is political analyst at Policy Solutions.