



The Budapest mayoral election – ambitions realised and deferred

Though it is hard to tell whether on the whole this is an advantage or a handicap, it must be said that with some notable exceptions the Fidesz is nothing if not loyal to its top cadres. This applies first and foremost to the PM himself, who was given another opportunity to run after two successive defeats; democratic parties very (and increasingly) rarely give their leaders such an opportunity.

The man who now benefits from this loyalty, the Fidesz's candidate for mayor of Budapest, István Tarlós, lost only once in his bid to oust the left from its most important stronghold. His (narrow) failure, however, was more conspicuous because it occurred in a situation when the general trend against the left had put him in an extremely strong position to defeat four-time incumbent Gábor Demszky in 2006.

Nevertheless, even though he is not even a party member, he became the Fidesz party group leader in the city parliament and, in spite of some grumbling by strictly anonymous party leaders, he is again the mayoral candidate and is all but guaranteed a victory.

Three factors help Tarlós's 2010 bid.

The first and most decisive is the Fidesz's overwhelming popularity, which exceeds even 2006 levels. As both the general election results and recent polls show, this popularity now reaches deep inside the heretofore difficult to breach capital.

Second is the fact that the opposition is fragmented and none of the other candidates commands support far beyond his own party's base (the current mayor, Gábor Demszky, had vastly outperformed his party in Budapest). Particularly with the two left-wing opposition parties unable to agree on a joint candidate, Tarlós is now the most recognised and dominant candidate.

Sometimes, the biggest challenge to any Fidesz candidate are extreme right or centrist candidates who draw right-wing voters away and – without the runoff possibility available in the general elections – tilt towns or districts towards left-wing candidates in spite of an overall right-wing majority (this quirk in the amazingly complex Hungarian electoral system is one of the reasons why Orbán loathes fragmentation on the right and has proclaimed that the right must be united under a “single flag.” Incidentally, it also partly explains his enthusiasm for the growing fragmentation on the left.)

This time around, the MDF – which very likely cost Tarlós the mayoralty in 2006 – is gone, and at least in Budapest Jobbik is not as strong as it seems. It'd be a whole separate story to

analyse in detail, but one of the most surprising aspects of the 2010 general election was the relatively weak performance of Jobbik in Budapest.

Though its share of the vote nationally (16.7%) was three times that of the previous extreme right party in Parliament, MIÉP (5.5% in 1998), with 10.84% in Budapest Jobbik hardly bested MIÉP (8.84% in 1998). Thus while Jobbik successfully and vastly expanded the extreme right base in the rural areas outside Budapest – the city where right-wing extremism had been anchored before 2006 –, it failed to noticeably increase the radical base in the capital itself. If Jobbik's candidate were performing at the national level in Budapest and LMP and the MSZP would have fielded a joint candidate, then Tarlós might have been put under pressure.

Thirdly, Tarlós is not a strikingly good candidate, but he is solid enough to carry the day with this exceptionally lucky alignment of the stars. In a party well-known for its fire-breathers, Tarlós has emphatically and successfully painted himself as a moderate, more in sync with the liberal leaning urban electorate in Budapest than the average Fidesz functionary.

Two episodes mar this picture somewhat, though most voters probably neither remember nor would care if they did. In 2001, as mayor of Budapest's 3rd district Óbuda and thus head of the local government that "hosts" the Sziget festival, Tarlós fought tooth and nail to prevent homosexual organisations from partaking in the festival as organisers of events. He went so far as to threaten to shut down the entire festival for the next year. The district court made clear that his actions constituted unconstitutional discrimination.

In the other episode, in 2006, he lost his temper and threatened a fellow alderman with manhandling, including the destruction of his glasses, though in the public perception the comic element of the recorded dispute mostly outweighed Tarlós's apparent dangerousness.

Recently, he not only strove to make clear that he is a moderate and tolerant (bar homosexuals) right-winger, but to the astonishment and frustration of many Fidesz-sympathisers, between the typical political attacks he also made the occasional friendly remark about Demszky (emphasising, for instance, that he thought the mayor untainted by the series of corruption scandals engulfing the city government). The incumbent mayor's unpopularity in this crowd stands out even compared to the generally despised left-wing political elite (though the curse of clinging to the office too long has also battered Demszky's popularity with significant segments of the left). Following his election, Orbán pointedly refused to meet with Demszky.

While it is clear that Tarlós' sop to the unrepentant adherents of "Demszkygrad" also serves to reduce whatever minimal risk to his chances there may be, it appears fairly certain that the opposition candidate is a true moderate at heart (bar homosexuals).

And though he has thus far not shown any signs of overwhelming political astuteness, and there are some legitimate doubts as to his ability to successfully lead a city that easily outranks some 70 countries in the world in terms of population, he could well emerge as a capable administrator. With the right team, he could even make a fine mayor.

If nothing else, he will be living proof that Budapest is not impregnable for the Fidesz, which is an essential element in Orbán's plan for a 15-20 years of Fidesz dominance. And if the hearts and votes of Budapestians can be conquered, then it may also be worth keeping the city well-funded. In this respect, an opposition victory would be an expensive luxury for the city, and no doubt some pragmatic voters will consider this when casting their ballot.

Nevertheless, it is clear that had it wanted to, the Fidesz could have fielded a considerably stronger candidate. 5th district mayor Antal Rogán has four successful years as the central district's leader behind him, and his overwhelming popularity was at display when he significantly outpolled his party in his electoral district. Like Tarlós, Rogán has sought to ingratiate himself with the sizeable left-liberal community in the city, and he has been remarkably successful, considerably more so than Tarlós.

As far as political talent goes, Rogán stands out even in a party among whose greatest strengths is – especially as compared to the anemic opposition parties – the number of strong potential candidates for premiership who have achieved political visibility despite Orbán's commanding control of the party.

It was all the more surprising then that not only was Rogán overlooked as a mayoral candidate, but after a curious back-and-forth he ultimately ended up declining the offer to serve as Tarlós's deputy mayor. This was one of the most important occurrences of the campaign so far, and given its impact on the composition of the future city government, it may be the most significant news overall.

It would take another column to summarise all the speculations surrounding this little drama, but in parting let's sum up some key thoughts about Rogán's inability or unwillingness to break out of the district mayoralty.

Rogán's once quick ascent was derailed when he announced his ambition to become PM way too early, in 2000 (he specifically envisioned himself sitting in this office this very year), thereby breaking the hypocritical but useful taboo on appearing ambitious. Loyalty in the Fidesz cuts both ways, and Rogán had spoken out of turn, thus contributing a key element to his multi-faceted falling-out with the party leadership. Over the years, he has worked himself back into favour (witness the fact that he is the sponsor of many of the more controversial Fidesz bills in Parliament), and as a testament to his impressive skills, he did this while crafting the abovementioned moderate persona with cross-ideological appeal.

In any case, Rogán's rise to the top – which he clearly aspires to, judging by his political activities – must be careful and not too sudden. While their motivations may differ, on this, at least, he and the Fidesz leadership agree. Tarlós's team, then, will have to do without Rogán, which might ensure that no one will steal the limelight but is nevertheless a blow to the political heft of the future city administration.