



Exit Demszky

Budapest's longtime mayor was extremely successful politically, but he outstayed his welcome

All of the nationwide elections since the parliamentary election of 2006 produced veritable landslides, and as such they inevitably felled some political “dinosaurs” of the post regime transition period, invariably from the left – though including some who had been labelled leftist against their will (and manifest political ideology), such as some of the MDF's major figures. While a few longstanding politicians bowed out rather than submitting to the voters' unavoidable verdict, others took whatever slight chances they had left only to find out that their personal popularity, such as it was, was not enough to overcome the “orange” steamroller.

This past week the most important surviving left-wing dinosaur, Budapest's Mayor Gábor Demszky, bade farewell after 20 years in office. Viktor Orbán is undeniably the most influential politician of the post-transition period, both in terms of the length of time spent in important offices and in terms of actual political clout, and especially considering the rare combination of the two in a volatile and capricious political environment. Among the players who vie for second place, Demszky is one of the key contenders.

Until the last municipal election, he easily brushed off the half-hearted attempts to unseat him, and in 2006, he barely but nevertheless successfully beat back a more serious challenge in an atmosphere when his party and the left-wing coalition were in freefall nationwide. In 1998, at the height of his popularity, he won with an astounding 58.22%, beating out the strongest opposition candidate by nearly 20%, and his own party's list by over 33%. In 2002 a socialist challenger cut into his margin, but with 46.7% he defeated current President Pál Schmitt by almost 11% and outperformed his party by 23%.

Over time, the demographic behind him has shifted somewhat. Young voters, for example, often became disaffected, while MSZP pensioners emerged not only as solid, but frequently even enthusiastic supporters of this leading figure of anti-communist opposition in the old regime. Nevertheless, to secure his victories, he successfully held together a disparate coalition of liberals, leftists and centrists.

Any politician who won five consecutive Budapest mayoral elections – four of which were direct popular elections — must be considered a political heavyweight. In response to a question by the internet news portal Index, 12th district mayor and leading Fidesz-politician Zoltán Pokorni grudgingly admitted this much when he said that at some point in the (presumably not too near) future there would be a statue for Demszky in Budapest.



By any measure, twenty years in the most important directly elected office is impressive – and too long. Even among Demszky's few remaining allies it was difficult to find anybody who shed tears about his departure. The atmosphere at the last of his 300 sessions at the helm of the city assembly was remarkably subdued – free of euphoria on the right and of nostalgia on the left.

Even if we were city development experts – which we are not – it would be difficult to conclusively assess Demszky's achievements as a mayor (not to mention doing so in a weekly column). As critics like to point out, the position he occupied was always ill-defined, which makes success (but also failure) difficult to clearly attribute. The Budapest mayoralty is embedded in a complex web of institutions with blurred lines of responsibility: the city council, the 23 district mayors with their respective district councils, and of course the national government, which also has a considerable influence over Budapest's development.

In effect, this meant that to achieve certain objectives, the mayor always had to plead with and pressure several other political bodies or officials, whose interests often collided with that of the mayor or the city. This system has few advantages, other than always offering alternative options when it comes to assigning blame and also making it more difficult to hog the limelight when it comes to taking credit for indisputable successes.

A brief aside: Fortunately, the Fidesz-government plans to reform this mess, which – if done intelligently and without giving priority to ulterior political motives – would be the most useful application of the two-thirds majority thus far (the structure of municipal governments is governed by a law requiring a two-thirds supermajority).

Critics charge that all Demszky essentially did was to skilfully manoeuvre this morass of (ir)responsibility, relying on the left's structural majority in the city to deliver him successive victories and a few more practically oriented individuals to perform the mundane task of actually governing the city.

What is certainly true is that the corruption scandals that recently erupted in numerous segments of the city's administrative institutions offer two alternative, but similarly unattractive images of Demszky's latter years in office: he is either clueless as to the goings-on in the institutions he is supposed to oversee or in some degree himself implicated in these scandals, that is he either tolerated them or profited from them. The former is more likely, but it still leaves him with considerable political responsibility for these events.

Politically speaking, Demszky has hurt the political left most by monopolising the leading position in the city to such a degree that as he leaves now, there is no one in sight with remotely similar name-recognition and political heft who could pose a formidable challenge to the Fidesz' mayoral candidate, István Tarlós (to be sure, the left-wing parties share the blame here, for they have failed to place qualified candidates in leading positions).

Especially by refusing to step aside in time and to help lay the basis for his political succession, Demszky shares the responsibility for leaving the left in a desolate state in its



most important – and one of the few remaining – bastions. The 2006 election was arguably a Pyrrhic victory for the left overall, and this also holds for the Budapest municipal election, as Demszky himself conceded in thinly disguised terms; by leaving him with the barest of majorities and more dependent on the MSZP-faction and Socialist deputy-mayors, his policy-making latitude and control decreased significantly.

The drudgery that followed did nobody anybody good, neither the city nor the coalition partners who had the distinction of not being merely the victims of their national parties' unpopularity, like other left-wing municipal leaders, but of being the architects of their own demise in the polls.

As for the national implications of these developments, they may be quite significant. Like in many countries, the left is on average stronger in the urban areas, its strength declining roughly proportionally with the size of the settlement, and vice versa for Fidesz. In the nail-biter 2002 elections, as well as in 2006, which was considerably closer than it was perceived, the left won the elections by sweeping all but 4 of the 32 Budapest electoral districts.

To remain competitive or even dominant in national elections, Fidesz does not need to win in Budapest. If it avoids a serious rout in the capital, its rural strongholds will be enough to tilt the overall electoral balance in its favour. And this is where a moderate mayor who successfully manages the city will definitely come in handy.

Such a person – along with similar district mayors, such as Antal Rogán – might convince a segment of pragmatic Budapest voters, who are habitually anti-Fidesz without necessarily harbouring deep ideological commitments, that the governing party is ultimately not an arch-conservative, provincial, etc. party, but a pragmatic umbrella formation whose policies ultimately mesh well with the needs of the city. To put it more bluntly, a successful Fidesz-mayoralty may chip away at left's structural advantage in Budapest, which for now persists regardless of the outcome of this particular election. A Fidesz victory now will be on credit. If it manages this credit well, Fidesz could turn it into a crucial political profit in future elections.