

WHEN THE STAKES ARE HIGH: CAMPAIGN MESSAGES IN HUNGARY

While municipal elections are of less importance than national ones, the study of local election communication shows that there are cases when political actors frame them as first-order elections. In 2019, the opposition managed to challenge the ruling Fidesz-KDNP alliance in Hungary, and gained mayoral offices in strategically important places. In the campaign, PM Viktor Orbán's party stressed the importance of local elections, utilizing a complex conspiracy theory. They argued that the stakes were high because Hungary's sovereignty was at risk. In this article, I evaluate the findings of a content analysis conducted on 86 speeches that were performed as part of the ruling party's election campaign with a special focus on topics and character remarks.

Zsófia Bocskay*



* Zsófia Bocskay is a Ph.D. candidate in political science and international relations at Koç University.

In the beginning of 2020, in the regional election campaign for Emilia Romagna in Italy, former Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini made it clear that a lot was at stake. It was ‘not a regional election’ but ‘a life choice.’¹ The Turkish municipal elections in 2019 were also framed as extremely important. High-profile politicians campaigned for and against candidates, including President Erdoğan. One of the central themes of the ruling Justice and Development Party’s election campaign was the survival of the state.²

It seems that much depends on how political actors frame elections. There is some evidence that politicians can alter voters’ perception. For example, the more nationally politicized local elections are, the more attend to the electoral booths.³ This prerequisites that political actors perceive municipal elections as a contest with high stakes. The key factor may be the strategic importance of the district, such as its economic volume, or that it is a swing district that could be taken by political rivals. Nevertheless, we know several examples when political actors up the ante in second-order election campaigns.

This was no different at the Hungarian local elections of 2019. Although the elections definitely did not bring a landslide victory to the opposition, they served as a test for their cooperation. The opposition used some innovative strategies, localized campaigns and focused on mobilization, particularly in the capital.⁴

The 13 October 2019 elections brought success for the opposition in rural towns, and they won most of the mayoral elections for Budapest districts. Gergely Karácsony, the allied opposition’s candidate became the mayor of the Hungarian capital, Budapest.

Despite staying dominant in municipal assemblies, the government’s results were worse than expected. In short, the opposition managed to challenge Viktor Orbán’s ruling party, the right-wing populist Fidesz-KDNP, that had also been in almost total control of mayoral offices and municipal assemblies since 2014.

There were reports about the ruling party seeking an explanation for defeat in the election campaign strategies,⁵ and that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was planning

¹ Rachel Donadio, “An Italian Flashmob Just Pushed Back Europe’s Populist Tide,” *The Atlantic*, 27 January 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/01/italy-election-emilia-romagna-matteo-salvini-sardines/605563/>

² Ayşe Sayın, “İstanbul seçimi: Erdoğan neden sahaya indi, seçim yeniden gündeme gelir mi?,” *BBC Türkçe*, 2 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-48700277>

³ Robert L. Morlan, “Municipal vs. National Election Voter Turnout: Europe and the United States,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 457-470.

⁴ Péter Pető, “Felült a halott: lett ellenzék. Megszűnt a NER: a helyén egy brutálisan erős Fidesz van,” *24.hu*, 14 October 2019, <https://24.hu/belfold/2019/10/14/onkormanyzati-valasztas-ellenzek-gyozelem-fidesz/>

⁵ “Orbának rosszul esett a Tiborcz-adó, a választási verség miatt összeült Kubatov és Habony,” *hvg.hu*, 14 November 2019, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20191114_orban_viktor_tiborcz_istvan_ado_kubatov_gabor_habony_arpad

several changes in personnel to undo mistakes for the 2022 national elections.⁶

“The ruling party argued that the opposition wanted to win local elections to wage war against Viktor Orbán, so that cooperation with the central government would become impossible and mean the end of prosperity and development in the country.”

The prime minister’s disappointment seems understandable due to the election campaign the Fidesz-KDNP alliance led. Their communication exhibited complete populism incorporating excluding, anti-elitist, and empty populist elements.⁷

They argued that Fidesz-KDNP was the only political actor who could fully represent the people both at home and abroad, and who could protect them from external and internal threats. Intertwined with empty populism, their anti-elitism was directed against both local and global elites, including the European Union and George Soros. In addition, the dichotomy between them and ‘leftist-liberals’ or ‘pro-migration leftists,’ both in national and international politics, and the exclusion of immigrants were in the heart of the 2019 local election campaign. Thus, in terms of communication, this campaign was no different from those prior to national elections.

Content Analysis of Election Speeches

The government raised the stakes by leveling the importance of municipal elections up to that of national elections. To understand what made stakes high at an otherwise second-order election, I conducted a content analysis to identify issues of salience. It allows us to understand how the ruling right-wing populist party managed to intertwine levels of politics, based on which issues they launched attacks against other political actors, and how they used conspiracies to mobilize the electorate for the election that was marked ‘the most important day of all times.’⁸

The analysis included 86 speeches published on the ruling party’s website

⁶ Dániel Bitá and József Spirik, “Orbán elégedetlen, változásokat akar a Fideszben,” *24.hu*, 23 December 2019, <https://24.hu/belfold/2019/12/23/fidesz-valasztokeruleti-elnok-orban-viktor/>

⁷ Toril Aalberg and Claes H. de Vreese, “Introduction: Comprehending Populist Political Communication,” pp. 3-11. In Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Strömbäck, and Claes H. de Vreese (eds.) *Populist Political Communication in Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁸ Speech of the mayor of Kecskemét at the annual Fidesz-KDNP congress, 29 September 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bj1y-A3KV80&ab_channel=Fidesz

during the 2019 local election campaign. These are mostly press briefings, but I included speeches at the annual party congress, too. Because of being conducted in strictly controlled environment, they represent well the ruling party's campaign organization, including the salience and timing of messages and the participants who communicated them to the public.

I split speeches into 2024 units based on distinctive themes and categorized them according to policy and character topics. Policy topics were located within seven domains; freedom and democracy, political system, economy, security, welfare and the quality of life, fabric of society, and social groups. I created these categories based on the coding scheme of the Manifesto Project,⁹ which I modified according to the context.

I coded character remarks as well based on categories of functional analysis.¹⁰ Character remarks are references to political actors, regarding their personal characteristics, leadership or organizational skills, or their values and principles. They are non-policy remarks targeting a political actor or actors, including the speaker himself or herself, but rival actors as well.

Fidesz-KDNP politicians rarely mentioned their own candidates in their speeches. For instance, back then incumbent Budapest mayor, István Tarlós, who was running for office again, was named only 25 times. This stands in great contrast with mentions of his challenger, Gergely Karácsony. They said his name almost ten times more often, on 245 occasions in the election speeches.

Out of the 920 character references, almost 68 percent were made on leadership abilities. Personal characteristics constituted almost 27 percent, and references to values and ideology accounted for only about 6 percent. Most of the remarks were negative targeting rival political actors, especially Karácsony's leadership abilities and the opposition's organisational skills. The opposition was mocked several times, particularly by the campaign chief of Fidesz, for being unable to form local alliances. They were also associated with war and chaos and accused with taking local elections as a stepping-stone for national politics.

Close Ties with the Government

One of the most frequently addressed issues was centralization (81), the lack of local

⁹ Manifesto Project Dataset Codebook, 2020, https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/download/data/2020b/codebooks/codebook_MPDataset_MPDS2020b.pdf

¹⁰ William L. Benoit, John P. McHale, Glenn J. Hansen, P.M. Pier, John P. McGuire, John P., *Campaign 2000: A Functional Analysis of Presidential Campaign Discourse* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers).

governmental autonomy. It was a crucial message of the ruling party that the victory of the opposition would translate into ‘war’ and ‘chaos’ and the loss of cooperation with the central government.

“The central message of the ruling party was that the 2019 local elections were of crucial importance. ‘There was a lot at stake’ because the country’s sovereignty was under attack. Defending against such attacks would only be possible if voters chose Fidesz-KDNP candidates in local elections.”

The ruling party argued that the opposition wanted to win local elections to wage war against Viktor Orbán, so that cooperation with the central government would become impossible and mean the end of prosperity and development in the country. Conversely, their rural and Budapest district mayors praised the government for its financial support.

It is of great importance that just some days before the elections, several rural mayors spoke at the annual party congress. The mayor of the south-eastern town Makó, for instance, argued that ‘humble cooperation with the government was essential for substantive growth,’ a strategy she had been applying instead of waging ‘partisan wars.’¹¹

In addition, a number of campaign speeches were delivered in various Budapest districts, at opening ceremonies of roads. Local mayors gave joint press briefings with the ministerial commissioner for road constructions. They argued that developments could not have become true without the care and support of the government. They referred to the development of infrastructure 42 times, and these references were clustered with the ones on centralization.

Scandals and the ‘Unfit Campaign’

The most crowded sub-category of the analysis was the wasteful and inefficient use of resources by local governments. Members of Fidesz-KDNP spoke about wasteful management 131 times. This topic usually recurred in the context of the so-called parking system scandal (42).

¹¹ Speech delivered by the mayor of Makó at the annual Fidesz-KDNP congress, 29 September 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3r3rvHASgo&ab_channel=Fidesz

The scene of the scandal was Zugló, a district in the capital led by Gergely Karácsony, opposition candidate for Budapest mayor. Several reports emerged on massive corruption behind the inefficient finances of the parking system, which involved both opposition and government parties in the municipality.

While Karácsony argued that parties in the municipal assembly had forced him to turn a blind eye on corruption, the ruling party framed the issue as the ‘inefficiency of the parking system’, which was the result of Karácsony’s ‘unfitness’ for office. Most of these arguments came from politicians from the same municipality, emphasizing Karácsony’s poor leadership skills that led the district into bankruptcy. They linked it to the issue of transparency, which they referred to 73 times. Accordingly, Karácsony, ‘the champion of transparency’ entered into suspicious contracts regarding the parking system. They further linked this to the opposition candidate’s integrity, challenging his trustworthiness.

In fact, one of the central themes of the campaign was Gergely Karácsony’s unfitness for office. According to a report, pro-government media characterized him as unfit about 500 times in only 30 days.¹² In accordance with this, the ruling party used the word ‘unfit’ and its variants 95 times in their election speeches. For example, the chief of local election campaign explained repeatedly that Karácsony was even unfit for his own name, that is why fellow partisans were nicknaming him.

However, the government party strictly avoided framing the parking system issue as a corruption scandal and stressed not the parties’ but Karácsony’s connection to it. This issue provided means to indirectly defend themselves against potential corruption allegations. They argued that Karácsony violated the freedom of information despite the repeated appeal of municipal Fidesz-KDNP politicians to publicize information regarding contracts.

Nevertheless, the ruling party attempted to create a corruption issue on another occasion. In total, they mentioned political corruption 48 times. This was mostly in connection with a minor conspiracy, in which the opposition was accused of copying voters’ data from ballot papers to create a list of their support base in a Budapest district. However, they dropped the subject after two speeches. Overall, their attempt to frame the issue as corruption seems to have failed.

At the end of September, an allegedly manipulated record of Gergely Karácsony was leaked. In the voice record, he was speaking about inter-party corruption in his district, which he had turned a blind eye on. More importantly, he claimed that

¹² Rita Pálfi, Gyula Csák, and Ádám Magyar, “500-szor is alkalmatlan, avagy kormánymédia a kampányban,” *Euronews*, 11 November 2019, <https://hu.euronews.com/2019/11/11/elemzes-a-media-minta-hatalom-eszkoze-magyarorszagon>

he and his family had been threatened by one of his political allies. This was the socialist Csaba Tóth, whose name had come up in a number of corruption allegations and an investigation about the disappearance of another politician in 2016. Though the record emerged close to the end of the campaign, the ruling party addressed it in three speeches, and only in one, they discussed it explicitly.

Materialistic Issues

Fidesz-KDNP partisans mentioned prosperity 39 times and poverty 9 times in their speeches. They discussed them in an abstract manner, often contrasting their candidates with those of the opposition. Moreover, they managed to dichotomize themselves and the previous left-wing governments. The image they were trying to create was that while the opposition was interested in ‘chaos,’ ‘destruction,’ and ‘war,’ the ruling party was on the ‘side of building, growth, and development.’ The government party appealed to labor groups 30 times in these election speeches, claiming the successful rise of employment rate imputed to the government’s communal work program.

Unlike the opposition, Fidesz-KDNP did not address social inequalities and very rarely discussed post-materialistic programs, such as environmental issues (2), green areas (10), culture (4), sport (3), or education (4). They did not propose any policies regarding climate change, development of green areas, or concrete plans regarding urban development.

The Grand Soros Plan: Conspiracies and the Struggle for Survival

Among the most frequent ones were remarks on security, particularly on sovereignty and survival. This category contains issues that undermine the self-determination of the state, and threats from other political actors that can potentially compromise the unity of the nation, territorial integrity, and autonomous decision-making with special regard to security policy. This category occurred 103 times in the speeches, mostly clustered with remarks on immigration (95), and even terrorism (14). In total, security was discussed 136 times, which makes it the most popular topic domain in the election campaign speeches of the Hungarian ruling party. The topic of immigration was carefully blended with terrorism and sovereignty, which always appeared as parts of an overarching conspiracy theory.

The central message of the ruling party was that the 2019 local elections were of crucial importance. ‘There was a lot at stake’ because the country’s sovereignty was under attack. Defending against such attacks would only be possible if voters chose Fidesz-KDNP candidates in local elections. Particularly, the opposition had to be prevented

from taking any mayoral offices. As a means of mobilisation, the government used a number of conspiracies. These conspiracies were accumulated into an overarching conspiracy forecasting a gloomy future for the country under opposition rule.

How was the overarching conspiracy theory built up? One of the central elements of the conspiracy theory was the opposition's alleged intention to demolish the border fence that the Fidesz-KDNP government had built against the influx of migrants. Once in power, the opposition would demolish the fence as it served European interests. In fact, the EU had been already impeached by the 'pro-immigration left' attempting to extend its influence on Hungary. They would do so through opposition mayors.

Several government MPs argued that the opposition, in secret or openly, was led by former socialist PM Ferenc Gyurcsány, who also controlled the opposition's Budapest mayor candidate. Gyurcsány's name appeared 56 times in these speeches, while they referred to his wife, opposition politician and Vice President of the European Parliament, Klára Dobrev, 11 times as Mrs. Gyurcsány. As Orbán put it, there were now 'two Gyurcsánys instead of one.'

They argued that Gyurcsány and Dobrev kept the Hungarian opposition under control serving EU interests. Moreover, the former prime minister's name was a two-edged sword, a permanent reminder of an era of unemployment, hopelessness, and poverty, contrasted to the days of prosperity that started with the Fidesz-KDNP government's election in 2010.

Dobrev's person was to bridge the European left and the Hungarian opposition in the government's discourse. They accused her of lobbying in the EU for reducing Hungary's financial support for border protection. Moreover, she and the opposition attempted to curtail Hungary's sovereignty in favor of the EU by depriving it from the right to determine its security policy. The alleged reason behind it was that the EU wanted Hungary to comply with migrant quotas and settle immigrants in its territory.

This part of the conspiracy was communicated by high-profile MPs and MEP Tamás Deutsch. They argued that the EU would promote opposition mayors in local elections to compel Hungary into compliance, as it has done around Europe.

The same politicians linked this issue to another conspiracy, the Soros network and its pro-immigration activity. First, George Soros had been manipulating the EU to finance his 'pseudo-NGOs' to foster illegal immigration. Second, Soros keeps the Vice President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans under control. MEP Deutsch argued that the Soros had given orders to the commissioner to

seek out members of the Hungarian opposition. Nothing proved this better than the opposition's candidate, Gergely Karácsony's and Timmermans's meeting in Brussels just before the elections. It was clear that 'Timmermans, George Soros's man wanted pro-immigration mayors to settle migrants in other European cities, and he plans to do the same in Hungary.' This meant that Timmermans was 'not Commissioner for the Netherlands in the European Union but commissioner for George Soros in the European Commission'.¹³

In addition, the same politicians argued that Soros and his men threatened states with cutting EU funds in case of non-compliance in terms of the immigration quota. Moreover, they wanted to delegate the supervision of EU funds to local governments (i.e., opposition mayors).

An interesting detail was that George Soros's name, including expressions such as 'Soros Plan,' 'human traffickers and Soros's pseudo-civilians,' 'hostile pseudo-civil Soros organizations,' and 'Soros network' appeared 23 times in these speeches, while, for instance, the government's candidate for Budapest mayor occurred 25 times.

'Christian Democracy in Practice'

But the victimization of Hungary did not end here. The EU elite was hostile to the Hungarian government, consequently, to the Hungarian people for another reason. That is their unreceptiveness to the Hungarian state model and national way of life, as PM Viktor Orbán explained in his speech at the annual party congress some days before the elections. Orbán did not participate in the campaign but addressed local elections in his speech at the congress. It was a credo of his and his party's actions, and an explicit, detailed statement on the conspiracies against Hungary.

Why had the EU been waging war against Hungary? Because after the 'first regime change' in 1989, the prime minister and his party made a second one in 2010. The second regime change was the abolishment of liberal democracy, and the implementation of Christian democracy into practice in 2010. Christian democracy is the state model in which Christian freedom is realised. Christian freedom is a tangible concept incorporating patriotism, protection of borders and Christian culture, protection of children, marriage, and family, orderliness, security, and the unification of the nation. It means opposing multiculturalism, immigration, same-sex marriage, etc. simultaneously. The EU could not tolerate the country's diversion from its values. Thus, it conspired with the opposition at home and abroad against the Hungarian government.

¹³ MEP Tamás Deutsch speech 4 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIASejN9HrI&ab_channel=Fidesz

A Thick Wall Ahead?

In November 2021, at the annual party congress PM Viktor Orbán delivered his speech that also marked the beginning of preparations for the 2022 national elections. His speech was very similar to the one he had given two years ago, both in terms of structure and content.

‘The whole left, Brussels, and the entire army of George Soros stand in our way in vain, for we will get through even the thickest wall together!’¹⁴ It seems that the thickest of walls is constructed only in the ruling party’s discourse. The real question is whether this drives the electorate up the wall enough to punish them this time.

¹⁴ Viktor Orbán’s speech at the annual party congress 14 November 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtE1d-HFKGoA&ab_channel=H%C3%ADrTV