

Why We Support Debates

With less than one month to go before local elections in Budapest, Gergely Karácsony's suggestion for a debate is being swept off the table by incumbent mayor István Tarlós. Though it is true that it is not in the interest of Tarlós to debate, we also know that the first prime ministerial debate had been forced by the opposition of the time, so it is not true in itself that there can only be a debate if it suits the incumbent politicians interests. It can also come about if the challenger can be creative or persuasive enough to swing public opinion. The leading opposition candidate clearly wants to seem as if though he is capable of taking on Tarlós, however it is not in the interest of the latter to give Karácsony the opportunity to prove this. As is, the opposition is portraying the fight for Budapest (which has a tendency to lean toward the opposition instead of the governing Fidesz party) as the first step in its journey to reclaim the nation.

Aware of why both sides are communicating the way they are, nevertheless we would be in favor of having debates. Simply because this has been the position of Centre for Fair Political Analysis for close to a decade now. Our think tank has advocated for both prime ministerial debates, as well as primaries (with televised debates) amongst the opposition parties. We think that Hungary's political culture would greatly benefit from these. Especially if they went above and beyond matters of policy.

We understand that such debates, while they do happen – see for example the recent mayoral debate in Istanbul – are not as well known as those for higher elected offices, nevertheless they are an important part of raising awareness for the elections and advancing political involvement. We also think that it is a duty of those running for public office to be available to the public to judge who deserves their vote. While Hungary is currently not going in this direction (as there have been fewer and fewer televised debates with the participation of Fidesz politicians) we do think that the introduction of such debates would be a welcome addition to the campaigns.

What should such a debate be about though? As mentioned above, not necessarily about policy issues. The candidates have more than enough chances to present their programs. Policy issues up the chances that candidates will not engage in meaningful debate, instead opting to bash the others achievements or plans, while using the rest of their time to launch into a monologue over their own suggestions. Ultimately this is interesting for only the most diehard political junkies. We therefore suggest a system that would allow for thematic suggestions to the debate in advance from citizens and organizations. The topics could then be aggregated and translated into thematic questions. This could bring real answers for voters and even shed light to areas that need more focus in the future.

All in all, we would like to see a big picture approach to the debate. After all, it is much more valuable information for the voter what the candidates ideas are about leadership, sustainable development and



urban development, than whether or not underpasses should be closed off at night. Wouldn't it be more useful if voters could learn how the candidates plan to relate to citizens, local and multinational companies? Or if we could learn more about what they think of, when asked about what they see as a liveable, likeable city that can also stand up to competition with the other capitals of the region? We'd have questions, and we are sure that others would have as well. Getting answers should not be an unattainable luxury. It should be the bare minimum.