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Is there a limit to opposition innovation?

The Hungarian opposition has taken a great leap towards its renewal with the introduction of the primary election. One cannot underestimate the value of this innovation after many years of intra-party conflict. The question remains however, whether a new system of selection will be enough to find a winning candidate against Viktor Orbán in next year's election?



In order to answer the previous question we must look at the three main functions of the opposition primaries. One, is to find the presumably strongest candidates on the local and national levels against the ruling party, Fidesz. The other, is to find a way to settle the opposition party rivalry in a democratic way, aiding their future cooperation. Last but not least, the primary also serves to address the issue of the opposition being seen as out of touch with the voters, whereas Fidesz is seen as “listening to the people”.

Despite the glitches in the new system (i.e. difficulty of online registration), the opposition seems to have profited in all three areas mentioned, although to a different extent in each one. We argue that the innovation brought into the candidate selection process by the primary system is important, but the focus has been too much on the technical, institutional aspects and less on the dialogue with the voters.

The first two functions of the primaries seem to have been the most successful to this date. The results of the voting will have settled one of the greatest problems of the opposition, namely the selection process of the candidates at the local level. There were simply too many parties facing Fidesz and as they all believed themselves to be the party that can serve as a viable alternative against the government, in the past two elections

they have failed to reach a majority because of the fragmented nature of the votes. While the number of parties hasn't diminished, the negotiation process to support the candidate of the opposition party most likely to have the highest success rate will have a major impact on the outcome of the 2021 elections. That this was done in a more transparent way than previously, and with somewhat less conflict is also a success.

On the other hand, whether or not the opposition parties and their supporters will be able to stand united behind the winning candidate for prime minister remains to be seen. Perhaps this is the greatest risk in connection to the first two functions of the primaries, as the candidate for prime minister is much more high profile, hence much more divisive than the candidates at the local level. He or she will be the face of the opposition, who will have to be able to mobilize a wide range of voters in order to reach even a simple majority. Just reaching the younger generation, or the retired age group will not be enough by itself.

This leads us to the fact that the most important aim of the opposition is to oust Viktor Orbán and his party from government. Their communication and strategy is completely built around this. The first two functions of the primaries are to create institutional conditions to be able to achieve this. Which is undoubtedly important if one wants to win elections,

nevertheless, it is not enough in itself. The opposition is basing its appeal to voters not on their own merit or program but on the fact that they are not Fidesz, and that only they can remove Viktor Orbán from office. As a result, very few new ideas have been incorporated into the opposition candidates' talking points. This is a problem because Viktor Orbán makes a point of placing his policy decisions into a wider political context.

When the opposition attacks with for example the contested issue of the Chinese Fudan University, the Prime Minister will not deal directly with the issue, but will give a geopolitical explanation elaborating on why Hungary needs to be on good terms with both China and the United States. Most voters appreciate this, as they connect this kind of grand strategy with the view of a strong leader capable of governing. Focusing solely on listing the policy issues upon which change is needed without placing them in context may feel to many people like wishful thinking. They don't want promises or brainstorming, they want a plan of action, which is not an easy thing to ask for owing to the many restrictions towards undoing Fidesz's political changes that have been put in place using the 2/3 majority. It is no wonder that one of the major disagreements amongst the opposition candidates is how to legally circumvent these obstacles. Being too radical might scare voters away, being too soft could have the same effect.

We can see from the high voter turnout in the first round of the primaries that it is not that the opposition cannot communicate well with (their own) voters. The large turnout is not necessarily a reflection on the *content* of their communication though. Much rather it is a reaction to the fact that there is a possibility to have a say in the selection process. It is the expression of support for the democratic way in which the opposition is aiming to choose its candidate. But will this be enough to win the election? Or is it the limit to the opposition's capacity for innovation?

If they intend to go further, the opposition needs to focus more on how it aims to carry out its ideas and most importantly WHY it aims to make the decisions they find important. They need to present them in the context of the national interest and how that relates to the interests of the country's international partners. They need to show it in the context of how these decisions will affect the daily lives of citizens. Whereas progress has been made in this field, and during the second prime ministerial debate we could see many references to international and local best practices the candidates aim to follow, there is still more to be done. Strategy and organization cannot win elections alone. Content matters.