

ELECTIONWATCH HUNGARY



Hungary Pre-Election Watch: April 2010 Parliamentary Elections

The political party system of Hungary emerged early as one of the most stable of all of the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but the results of April's parliamentary elections may bring some major changes to the political landscape. The system has been dominated for more than a decade by competition between two major parties, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) on the left and the Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz) party on the right side of the political spectrum. For most of the period since 1990, the major parties have been joined in the parliament as well as in coalition governments by two smaller parties, the social-liberal Union of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) on the left and the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) on the right. In the 2006 elections, the Socialists managed to win 190 seats in the 386-member parliament, while Fidesz (together with its junior ally, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP)) captured 164 seats. The Socialists opted to join forces with the Free Democrats continuing the coalition that ruled during the 2002 to 2006 mandate, achieving for the first time the re-election of the ruling party since the democratic changes in 1990.

Since the 2006 elections, two important trends have fundamentally altered the national political landscape. Firstly, popular support for MSZP has collapsed. In September 2006, Hungarian state radio broadcast a secret recording of a now infamous speech given by then Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany to a closed-door meeting in a town called Balatonöszöd with MSZP members of parliament following their 2006 election victory. On the tape, which is rife with profane language, Gyurcsany admits that the government had "lied for the last year-and-a-half, two years" and that they've "done nothing for four years. Nothing." The public exposure of what is now known as the Balatonöszöd speech set off a national scandal, triggering riots and demonstrations and marked the beginning of the long, steady decline in popular support for MSZP. Support for the Socialist Party, which took 48 percent of the vote in the 2006 parliamentary elections and claimed popular support well above 30 percent for most of 2006 prior to the Balatonöszöd scandal, now hovers in the mid-teens in a dead-heat with the far-right party, the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik).

Secondly, support for the smaller center-left and center-right alternatives, SZDSZ and MDF, has been in decline for years and has now dwindled to the point that even after joining forces to field candidates it appears that the parties may not be able to pass the five percent threshold to enter parliament. (SZDSZ will appear in these elections primarily only as a few candidates on the MDF list.) This opening, together with the collapse of the Socialists, has created opportunity for newcomers. February 2009 saw the establishment of a new center-left party supporting environmental protection and sustainable development. Aligned with the European Green Party, the Politics Can Be Different party (LMP) took 2.6 percent of the vote in the June 2009 European Parliament election but has been polling above the five percent threshold recently and stands a serious chance of getting into parliament. The far-right Jobbik, which surprised many with its 14.8 percent total in last year's European

Parliament election, continues to enjoy strong support and, according to several forecasts, may contend with the Socialists for second place in the upcoming ballot. Last June's European election results as well as recent public opinion polls indicate that Jobbik draws its increased support from several groups, including disaffected Socialist voters, first-time and previously inactive voters, as well as the far-right voter base.

Fidesz last governed when it won Hungary's 1998 general elections. Though out of power since 2002, the party has maintained strong support among the electorate and claimed a resounding victory in last year's vote for the European Parliament, winning 14 of Hungary's 22 seats.

Party preference among likely voters (percentage):

Party	March 10-12	March 17-19	March 24-26	March 31-April 2
Fidesz	56	62	59	63
MSZP	16	15	15	15
Jobbik	16	16	14	11
LMP	5	9	9	7
MDF	5	4	3	4

If you could decide the prime minister, who would you choose?

Candidate/Party	March 10-12	March 17-19	March 24-26	March 31-April 2
Viktor Orban (Fidesz)	45	49	47	52
Attila Mesterhazy (MSZP)	16	15	15	10
Gabor Vona (Jobbik)	6	5	6	5
Lajos Bokros (MDF)	12	11	12	12
Don't Know/No Answer	26	25	25	21

(Source: [The Perspective Institute](#), margin of error +/- 3.2 percent)

The Campaign

These dramatic changes in the political landscape have of course had a significant impact on the campaign and the electoral strategies of the parties. Compared with previous parliamentary elections, the 2010 election campaign has been the shortest, the least ideological and the first one where the clear winner seemed apparent weeks before the ballot.

All of these factors, with the exception of the rise of Jobbik, have reinforced the leading position of Fidesz, which has run the kind of low-key, even-keeled campaign that one might expect of the presumptive winner. Fidesz selected three main messages while focusing mostly on the popular strength of the Fidesz brand. The relatively centralized nature of the campaign meant that the candidates (those running in the single-mandate districts) had virtually no outdoor advertisements until the very last phase of the campaign. This was especially true in the countryside and with new candidates.

Fidesz's first message promised legal investigation into the alleged cases of corruption at companies publicly held or with close ties to the state such as the Budapest public transportation company (BKV), and the privatization and then re-nationalization of Malev, the Hungarian airline. The second message, in line with the non-ideological character of the campaign, emphasized "national causes" focusing on economic growth, health care, and social and public security. The third main component in Fidesz's campaign encouraged voters not to "split" their votes.

Similar to the ballot in Germany, the ballot for the parliamentary elections in Hungary allows voters to cast two votes, one for the preferred candidate in their single-mandate district contest and one for their preferred party. This creates the possibility for a voter to split their votes, checking the box for a candidate of one party and casting a vote for a different party on party preference. The "Fidesz 2x" and "only Fidesz" slogans were specifically directed at the Jobbik threat and was reinforced by the party's unequivocal declaration before Easter weekend that it would not form a coalition with Jobbik, which is not an ally of Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party.

In addition to a very favorable electoral climate, in an election where overall turnout will likely be lower than in the past, Fidesz has another distinct advantage. Since its defeat in 2002, the party has invested considerable energy and resources into building what is now one of the most sophisticated voter mobilization operations in Europe. None of the other parties have the capacity to get their voters to the polls the way Fidesz does, and this voter mobilization ability could put it in reach of a two-thirds majority.

The Socialists, facing the prospect of their worst electoral defeat ever, have attempted to find a position to minimize their losses and re-build for the local elections scheduled for later this year in October. The campaign, however, has struggled to find a consistent message, reflecting the deep internal divisions in the main party of the left.

The initial theme, a "new start," focused on its young candidate for prime minister, Attila Mesterhazy, and emphasized the socially sensitive redistribution of the fruits of the expected economic recovery. The party's program addressed rising pensions, job creation and educational opportunities. The emphasis on the "new start" and "modernization of the nation" soon faded, however, and the campaign seemed to shift focus, aiming instead at winning elderly voters, the traditional core of the Socialist base, and playing up the threat of Fidesz cooperating with the extreme right.

With the public sparring between figures of the moderate and extreme right as well as Fidesz's clear refusal of any coalition deal with Jobbik, this MSZP message gathered little political traction. Realizing that both MDF and LMP, by appealing to disaffected leftist voters, had become real threats to the party holding its second-place position, MSZP, has finally focused on the "uselessness" and "waste" of supporting small parties.

Jobbik has attempted to capitalize on the momentum generated by its success in the election for European Parliament, presenting itself as the new force that would finally bring justice, sentencing corrupt incumbent parliamentarians to "twenty years for the past twenty years." While its 2009 European Parliament campaign relied heavily on extreme rhetoric on Roma crime, in this year's parliamentary campaign the party has emphasized more populist themes like anti-corruption and law and order. With recent polls showing Jobbik has a chance to

overtake MSZP for second place, it has begun to portray itself as the winning option, whose "two-thirds majority is threatened only by Fidesz."

For the traditional "satellite" parties, MDF and SZDSZ, the real prospect of falling out of parliament and danger of political extinction has provoked significant changes. The MDF, the party of the late prime minister and Hungarian conservative icon, Jozsef Antall, sacrificed some of its traditional voter base by following political opportunity to the left and adopting an increasingly liberal profile, including cooperation with the Free Democrats. The shift culminated with the election of Lajos Bokros, well-known liberal economist and former Socialist minister of finance, to the European Parliament last June and his selection as MDF's candidate for prime minister.

The Free Democrats suffered a major blow when amidst fierce internal disputes, many of its founding fathers, Hungarian liberal intellectuals, abandoned the party leaving it without tested leadership and a dwindling core of voters. Beside their support for a mainstream liberal economic approach to the economy, MDF and SZDSZ base their alliance on a need for a restoration of the system of checks and balances in Hungary's democratic order, a system undermined, they assert, by the concentration of so much power in the hands of the two big parties. This is their "third-way" political program, a continuation of their appeal for the need for a third, balancing force to keep the large parties in check, a political position that has been typical for MDF for several years.

The Electoral System and Outlook for the First Round

Hungary's electoral law is among Europe's most complex and combines three systems to elect the 386-member parliament: voting for single candidates from single-mandate district (SMD) contests (176 seats), voting for party lists in larger territorial districts using proportional rules to award seats (152 seats), and proportionally allocated compensation seats from national compensation lists (58 seats). The first two levels each require a ballot, while the national compensation list uses "surplus" votes not counted at the primary levels.

In each SMD, candidates compete directly, and each voter chooses his or her most preferred candidate on the ballot. Candidates may be nominated by parties or may run as independents. The candidate with the most votes wins, although if no candidate obtains more than half of the votes in a first round of voting, a run-off election is held two weeks later. The top three candidates and any candidate with more than 15 percent of the vote compete in the run-off election, in which the top vote-getter wins the seat.

In order to succeed in this system, parties have to overcome a number of hurdles. Firstly, to qualify as a candidate in any one of the 176 SMDs, the candidate must collect so-called nomination slips from a minimum of 750 voters, each one signed by the voter personally. A party's success in qualifying individual candidates also affects its eligibility in the proportional list races of the territorial districts.

For a party to be eligible to register a list of candidates for the territorial districts, the party must have a certain minimum number (usually one quarter of the total individual seats in that district) of qualified single-mandate candidates. The smaller parties, MDF and SZDSZ in particular, struggled to meet these minimum eligibility requirements. For the national compensation list (which determines 58 seats), only six parties have met the eligibility requirements, compared to 10 four years ago.

Approaching April 11, first-round Election Day, this changing landscape presents a number of issues to watch. According to most forecasts, the Fidesz victory will give it a majority outright and enable it to govern alone. But if Fidesz's get-out-the-vote operation delivers strong results in the 176 single-mandate contests, it may also be within reach of a two-thirds majority, which would give the party power to change the constitution.

Who takes second place also carries much significance. If Jobbik manages to overtake MSZP, a third-place finish would be a crushing defeat for the Socialists and have major impact on the future direction of the left. Finally, what, if any, other parties will cross the five percent threshold and fill out the rest of the parliament? A successful showing for LMP could mean the emergence for the first time of a viable green party in Hungary. Failure on the part of MDF, including its handful of SZDSZ candidates, could very well mean the end of two parties that have been major players in Hungarian politics since 1990.

IRI in Europe

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