

Race for Budapest

The campaigns of the Lord Mayor candidates and the possible composition of the Municipal Assembly

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SUMMARY

- Of the three candidates for lord mayor, Gergely Karácsony had the best chance of being re-elected, but Alexandra Szentkirályi's withdrawal turned it into an uncertain situation.
- However, the withdrawal of Szentkirályi might not help to replace Karácsony.
- The new electoral system could make the General Assembly of Budapest even more diverse, with at least four and up to seven lists of candidates.
- Whoever wins the mayoral election, the winner will face a serious challenge to build a stable coalition in the Assembly.
- Given the coalition constraints, the cooperation of Karácsony and Vitézy, who have similar political ideas, can be expected
- Peter Magyar's declared aim is to make the TISZA Party the tip of the balance, without them no one can create an Assembly majority
- In the 2024-2029 cycle, the decision-making processes will be longer, and their resolution will only be possible through compromises

INTRODUCTION

The 2024 municipal elections in Budapest were already surrounded by a number of conflicts at the beginning of the year. Opposition parties running together in 2019 have split into several factions, sparking heated political debates in several districts over candidate selection and cooperation. With changes in the electoral system over the past six months, a shift in the political climate and the emergence of new actors, we are facing the most difficult election to predict in decades. This is particularly true in the capital, where even in recent weeks there have been substantial developments with the entry of the Tisza Party to the competition by participating in the elections to the General Assembly of Budapest. The two most important questions for the governability of the capital are who will win the election of the Lord Mayor and how the General Assembly of Budapest will be structured. Our analysis looks at these two issues, i.e. the candidates for mayor, their political character and campaign, and the possible composition of the General Assembly.

THE CANDIDATE FOR LORD MAYOR

Although there were four candidates for mayor, our analysis only looks at the two whose support has been the highest in recent months and still running. On the one hand, because András Grundtner, the candidate of Mi Hazánk, is not even considered by his own party to be a likely winner, his candidacy is rather demonstrative, and on the other hand, because his support among the capital's residents is by all measures rather low, and his gap is significant compared to any of the members of the Karácsony-Vitézy duo. Moreover, the visibility of his campaign was minimal, and his presence was more to show that Mi Hazánk could run a candidate for mayor even in the capital, which they considered to be 'left-liberal', and that this would allow them to run their own list for the General Assembly of Budapest.

With the withdrawal of Alexandra Szentkirályi on the 7th of June, only two days before the elections, created a completely new situation. The fact that he called on his supporters to vote for Dávid Vitézy could have a major impact on the final result. However, as Szentkirályi herself is not running, she will not be discussed in depth in this analysis. That is why we will analyse the two candidates considered as the front-runners: Gergely Karácsony and Dávid Vitézy.

Gergely Karácsony

As in the 2019 election campaign, Karácsony emphasises his commitment to green policy and social issues. As the incumbent, he talks about the achievements of the city government over the past five years and the future goals that will be pursued in the same spirit. In his speeches, he has highlighted the difficulties of a term that is coming to an end - the COVID-19 epidemic that broke out a few months after he took office, the energy crisis in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine and the significant government cuts - and the fact that the capital has managed to remain functional and to make significant investments in a challenging period, such as the renovation of the Chain Bridge and the completion and full accessibility of the M3

metro line. In his programme, Plus 5 Years for Budapest, focuses on reducing housing (and related) costs, improving public transport and the city's natural environment, and aims to increase the average life expectancy of Budapest residents by 5 years.

Beyond building his own political character, it may be important to examine his relationship with Vitézy. It is worth doing this primarily because there was almost no substantive interaction between Alexandra Szentkirályi and Dávid Vitézy besides Szentkirályi's withdrawal in favour of Vitézy.

His relationship with Dávid Vitézy is really complex and ambivalent. Dávid Vitézy was State Secretary for Transport in the fifth Orbán government, and previously CEO of BKK during István Tarlós' first term as Lord Mayor. Gergely Karácsony said at the beginning of the campaign that he considered Vitézy as Fidesz's candidate, and he predicted that either Alexandra Szentkirályi or Dávid Vitézy would withdraw at the end of the campaign. With the events of June the 7th Karácsony's prediction came true. In addition to his government party affiliations, Karácsony also attacks Vitézy for his professional past, pointing out that BKK, which at the time operated under the Fidesz city government, opted for a renovation by a Russian manufacturer instead of a complete replacement of the M3 metro trains, and blames Vitézy for the billions spent unnecessarily on the failed e-ticketing system. Meanwhile, Dávid Vitézy is calling the current Lord Mayor to account for not keeping some of his promises and for what he sees as Gergely Karácsony's use of the mayor's position as a stepping stone to becoming prime minister. According to Vitézy, Karácsony is still in debt for the realisation of developments that cannot be explained by the government's withdrawal of resources.

The relationship between Vitézy and Karácsony is adversarial at the level of communication panels, but both were open about their potential cooperation under certain conditions. This was also because, although there are differences in the political vision of the two candidates, elements such as improving public transport, greening the city and alleviating the housing crisis are at the forefront of both their programmes. The policy similarities can therefore lead to inevitable

alliances. However, Szentkirályi's and the Fidesz's support in favour of Vitézy may mix this situation up. As according to Karácsony, Vitézy is now considered as a candidate of the right-wing governing party, it may complicate the possibility of cooperation. Previously Karácsony and Vitézy both spoke about working together with the other. However, after the withdrawal Vitézy said that as Lord Mayor he will not have a deputy mayor from Fidesz or the Left-wing coalition (including Karácsony). It is likely that, while a few weeks ago Karácsony openly discussed that in certain circumstances he would ask Vitézy to be his deputy, now Karácsony will refuse to cooperate with Vitézy.

Dávid Vitézy

Dávid Vitézy presents himself as the third way choice, apolitical, technocratic candidate who is passionate about the capital (and especially about transport), but who takes on a political role in order to contribute to the development of Budapest. His campaign slogan, "Real urban development instead of a party-political battlefield!", also emphasises the reinforcement of the expert image he has previously developed. This image is further reinforced by his 101-point programme and the fact that his association's candidates are typically urbanists, cultural figures or businessmen. However, the fact that Vitézy is a candidate for LMP as well as his own NGO weakens the image of being completely independent of politics, as well as the backing of Fidesz. After Szentkirályi's withdrawal it will not be easy for Vitézy to maintain the third way image of himself, but still tries to do that. However, the fact that the Orbán-government's propaganda media and the Fidesz funded influencers started to openly support Vitézy, the image of the political outsider might shatter.

Five years ago, LMP backed Karácsony as a candidate for mayor and in 2021 for prime minister, but the party has since had a strained relationship with the former politician. Gergely Karácsony and LMP president Péter Ungár have openly attacked each other during the campaign, Ungár often being much more critical of Karácsony than Vitézy, but these attacks are more political than urbanistic-urban management based.

Dávid Vitézy's programme focuses on similar themes to Gergely Karácsony's, and their policy ideas on the city are similar. He tries to differentiate himself from the mayor with the aforementioned expert role and by implying that he wants to represent "Budapest beyond the boulevard", and a key element of this communication panel is his opposition to the redevelopment of Clark Ádám Square, which he would rather use the funds to develop suburban hubs.

Withdrawal

The idea that Vitézy or Szentkirályi would step down in favour of the other was first raised by Karácsony, and for a long time, it seemed to be a campaign tool to nominate himself as the only non-Fidesz candidate. But as Szentkirályi withdrew from candidacy, it created a new, complex situation.

The resignation of Szentkirályi means a serious loss of prestige for Fidesz. Not only because the Budapest organization of Fidesz has been completely reorganised under Szentkirályi, but also because the party last ran its own candidate for mayor in 1998, János Latorcai, and since then both Pál Schmitt and István Tarlós have run as Fidesz-backed but outsider candidates, neither of them being Fidesz members at the time of the elections (Schmitt later joined, Tarlós did not). Szentkirályi was Fidesz's first own Budapest candidate in 26 years, so with her step aside in favour of Vitézy, who is not an independent but a candidate of another party, it may do considerable damage to Fidesz's standing. Not least for practical reasons, it might be a counterproductive move, as it means that Vitézy would become Fidesz's candidate (at least a candidate that is backed by Fidesz), which could discourage Vitézy's voters who want to distance themselves from both Fidesz and the left-wing coalition. Moreover, it can be counterproductive, because Karácsony would probably find it even easier to mobilise his own voters by claiming that he was right on the issue of Vitézy being a Fidesz candidate.

LISTS COMPETING FOR SEATS IN THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

For effective governance of the city, it is not enough for one candidate to win the title of Lord Mayor, but he or she must also secure a majority in the assembly, as

only one of the 33 representatives is the Lord Mayor. Under the electoral rules, that were amended last year, the remaining 32 seats will be decided by a list vote. Since list voting is proportional and, unlike in the case of parliamentary elections, the threshold is 5 percent even in the case of joint candidacies of several nominating organisations, there is a good chance of a more diverse Budapest Assembly than at present. Of course, it is still unlikely that all parties and organisations will get in, but based on the social support measured in recent months, the following lists have a realistic chance of doing so:

- DK-MSZP-Parbeszéd
- Fidesz-KDNP
- Mi hazánk
- MKKP
- Momentum
- TISZA Party
- With Dávid Vitézy for Budapest - LMP

2024 is a turbulent year in Hungarian politics, and this is especially true for the capital. New alliances have been formed, while at the same time, some previous cooperation has so broken down that the parties are running against each other. Meanwhile, several new, highly popular players have entered the scene, while support for other parties has waxed and waned. It is therefore difficult to estimate exactly how the 32 seats will be distributed among the candidates, and it is also possible that one or more of the parties that are close to 5% in national polls (Our Home, MKKP, Momentum) will fall below the threshold and will not be able to delegate any members to the Assembly. It is almost certain that no scenario can be expected in which any of the lists alone could win a majority of seats. For this reason, coalition pressure can be expected, whoever wins the mayoralty. It is therefore worth taking a look at which candidates can count on the support of which parties in the capital's government.

Alexandra Szentkirályi may not be a candidate anymore, but she is still the leader of the biggest party's list. The Fidesz list has a good chance of winning the most votes in the general election, given the division of opposition parties. However, it is unlikely that the governing party candidates alone will win more than half of the list votes, as Fidesz tends to perform less well in Budapest than nationally. The same is true for Mi Hazánk, the only party that, based on our current knowledge, could be a potential cooperation partner for Fidesz. Nevertheless, the two right-wing parties together are unlikely to create a majority in the Assembly, as Mi Hazánk's national support has been declining in recent months and could easily slip below the 5% threshold in the traditionally less right-wing capital. Even Fidesz was to win the list voting, the governing parties would probably not be able to create a stable majority behind her in the capital, but at most they could cooperate with other parties on issues, but this could force Fidesz to make compromises that would affect the image of the party as a potential governing force.

Gergely Karácsony could count on their support as a candidate on the DK-MSZP-Párbeszéd list, and on that of Momentum, which has a separate list but is declared to support Karácsony as a mayoral candidate. Momentum's recent weakening means that they can also be left out of the Assembly (but unlike the radical right-wing party, the liberal Momentum is stronger in Budapest than nationally). Even if they succeed in staying in, with them it is still unlikely to have a majority for the left-wing coalition, and this is uncertain even if they manage to win the support of MKKP, which is closer to them in terms of worldview but has deliberately stayed away from opposition cooperation (their national support has also suffered in the last few months).

The joint list of Vitézy Dáviddal Budapestért Association and LMP could face a similar problem as Karácsony, even if the former BKK CEO wins the mayoral election. Although Vitézy deliberately built himself up as a candidate acceptable to MKKP during the campaign (he publicly supported MKKP president Gergely Kovács in the XII district primaries, he was the only candidate to attend the debate organised by MKKP's candidate for mayor of Újpest), it is unlikely that the two lists together will be able to win a majority, and this would probably not change substantially if

Momentum, which has been trying to keep a greater distance from left-wing parties since 2022, joined them. But the Momentum-Vitézy rapprochement may also be hampered by Szentkirályi's move. It is also worth saying, as was mentioned at the beginning of the analysis, that Karácsony and Vitézy could probably cooperate more easily with each other on the basis of their similar urban and political visions than with Fidesz and the TISZA Party. Therefore, if MKKP and Momentum also get into the Assembly, and the DK-MSZP-P and Vitézy list is strong, they might even win a slim majority, which would mean a very fragile cooperation, so the role of compromise would be huge. This would mean slow and sometimes seemingly cumbersome governance, but in many cases, the inclusion of new aspects could be beneficial to the citizens of the city in the long run. It could set an example of how politics should be about cooperation between social groups and often compromise as a result, rather than the majority opinion imposed on minorities. In such a situation, Gergely Karácsony would be similar with the situation, since he has already had to govern the capital together with several parties and independent candidates during the current term, and Dávid Vitézy would be ready to work with him, judging by his statements so far (at least that was what he said until Szentkirályi's withdrawal).

However, the four parties may not even reach a majority in the Assembly together. The reason for this is that the TISZA Party has announced that it will set up a list, but its elected representatives will be willing to cooperate with any of the blocs only and exclusively on issues. Based on national measurements, Péter Magyar's party is likely to make a strong appearance in the assembly elections, but in the case of TISZA, it is not even possible to predict whether the party's support in Budapest is higher or lower than the national average. Thus, if they do well enough, it is quite possible that none of the mayoral candidates will be able to create a majority behind them without the support of Péter Magyar. The leader of the TISZA Party has said that his aim is to force Fidesz and the DK-MSZP-P list to cooperate, supporting his claim that the two political blocs are colluding behind the scenes. However, deliberately staying out of the decision-making process could be counterproductive for the party, so it is most likely that they will work with the different factions in their own interests. Potential allies could include the MKKP, as Péter Magyar has previously made positive comments about the candidacy of the

party's president for mayor, and Dávid Vitézy. However, when Magyar was asked earlier about the former state secretary, he replied that Dávid Vitézy was a Fidesz candidate (Vitézy, however, repeatedly stressed during his campaign that he would be happy to work with Péter Magyar).

It can therefore be said that each of the candidates for mayor and the four grand lists can count on allies, but no one is likely to be able to build a stable majority in the Budapest Assembly. While this will create difficulties for some of the players (as they will have to do the political work to build support for each decision), it may also have positive effects and in the long term, it may help to spread democratic thinking and strengthen a culture of compromise. This process has already begun in recent years and could be significantly strengthened by the likelihood that parties that are not clearly allied with each other will have to work together. This in turn will lead to a slowing down of decision-making, depending on the current level of contestation, so that whoever wins the mayoralty is likely to be attacked on his or her ability to govern.

CONCLUSION

Gergely Karácsony is being in a tough situation from Alexnadra Szentkirályi's withdrawal, he might have a chance to retain the position of Lord Mayor. Dávid Vitézy primarily questions the professionalism of the mayor's work. Karácsony's best chance of winning is to present himself as the only candidate with no Fidesz ties. Fidesz's support of Vitézy after Szentkirályi's withdrawal strengthens this narrative. It may further reinforce this image and could better mobilise voters who want to vote against Fidesz. The current Mayor of Budapest is not in such an easy position in the case of the Municipal Assembly. Due to the reformed electoral system, at least four lists will be included in the body, but if the smaller parties reach the lower threshold, up to seven parties could be represented. Because of the split, it is expected that whoever wins the mayoral election, all candidates will have to form coalitions behind them. Fidesz has the worst chance of building a majority, but the parties in opposition nationally could also face difficulties. Whether Karácsony or Vitézy becomes Budapest's leader, they will need to win the support of each other to have a stable government, as well as Péter Magyar, whose party is seeking a balancing role in the Assembly.