
Upcoming elections in Hungary. But Europe has pushed 'illiberal democracy' further away

The run-up to the 2022 elections, scheduled to take place next April, will see Budapest's 199 parliamentary seats up for grabs and, needless to say, the post of prime minister. Viktor Orban, who secured an absolute majority with his Fidesz party in the last three rounds, is increasingly concerned. Over the past few weeks, all six opposition parties formed an alliance in support of Peter Marki-Zay's candidacy, who won the opposition race on October 16 in the second round of the primaries. Conservative Catholic Marki-Zay, 49, father of seven, was until now the mayor of a small town with the unpronounceable name of Hodmezovasarhely. He voted Fidesz in his youth, before leaving for the US and Canada where he studied, worked and picked up perfect English. He then returned and became mayor of the unpronounceable city, beating a Fidesz opponent. He is now running to succeed Orban as an 'independent' candidate, backed by the Hungary for All movement. He is reported to have what it takes to convince both Fidesz's disenchanting constituency - albeit circumspect - and a virtually silenced and worried civil society, which stands for freedom and the rule of law. The fight on corruption and trustworthiness are his two watchwords, starting with a trip to Brussels to make himself known. He endorses European values, intends to adopt the euro currency, would like his country to join the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), and is pro same-sex marriage ("because it is an act of civility", he recently explained in an interview with the BBC). His electoral promise: to bring to justice all those who have pillaged the country over the last 30 years.

Changed legislation, pressure on the media. However, Marki-Zay is bound to face a very challenging campaign, given Orban's rather autocratic grip on the country. And nor does he wish to be challenged. To the extent that independent media have been silenced, journalists intimidated and spied on over the years. *Orban's media surveillance policy has been meticulously planned and carried out since 2010, when he came to power for the second time and modified a number of laws regulating the press, as he often does,* giving special powers to the National Media Authority for monitoring information and the Media Council. With a succession of moves that newspapers such as VoxEuropa regularly monitor and denounce, a media empire is now the official mouthpiece of government policy. At the same time, attempts to crush any independent publication have been ongoing: Klubrádió, Népszabadság, Origo, Index.hu, are among some of the most popular media outlets that were torn down over the years, in one way or another. He will thus be able, with his newspapers and TV channels, to continue convincing those Hungarians who don't consult the Internet for information and only understand their native language, of the validity of his programme, which has so far instrumentally claimed to champion Christian values.

No to migrants and no to Soros. Whether he really means it is another question, for while he remains friendly and generous towards the Hungarian Church, over the past years he has made a number of missteps. One in particular, a dramatic one, on the subject of migrants, when the Balkan route brought thousands of people seeking a better future to the Hungarian borders. *He responded by building a wall, sowing contempt and attempting to criminalise not only illegal immigration but also the NGOs that help desperate people - labelled as "a national security risk" - with the infamous "anti-Soros" laws of 2017.* The European Court of Justice and the infringement procedure initiated by the Commission subsequently partially changed the fate of those laws. However, NGOs and their budgets remained under the control of a government body responsible for ensuring that there is no undue foreign interference.

A 'strange' referendum. There is now another outstanding issue involving human rights and the EU, namely the laws banning LGBT propaganda or, in the words of the Hungarian government, envisaging that the sex education of children is the exclusive right of parents. Clearly, adherence to this concept might change according to its wording. In fact, *Orban is now aiming at this, and in order to gain the upper hand with the EU he has called for a referendum, approved by parliament, requesting the Hungarians to decide for themselves on this matter.* The questions to

which Orban is calling for a "no" answer were released past July: "Do you support public education facilities having educational programs for underage children, without the parents' consent, that introduce sexual orientations? "Do you support the propagation of gender reassignment treatments to underage children? Do you support making gender reassignment treatments available to underage children? Do you support the unrestricted sharing of media content with underage children that influences their sexual development? Do you support sharing media content with underage children that portrays gender change?." This is a fine trap for many citizens. The date of the referendum has not been fixed yet, but a recent, umpteenth, amendment to the law now allows a referendum to be combined with a political vote. **Tug of war with the EU.** By doing so, Orban has made his country increasingly unpopular with the EU. The "illiberal democracy" that he is trying to establish is not at all consistent with the rule of law, nor with the values and freedoms that the EU-27 set as the cornerstone of their union. Moreover, at stake are €7.3 billion in grants under the NextGenerationEU programme, which Hungary is to receive and which the Commission is still clinging to in Brussels. Not least because, in addition to the "serious violations" that Hungary is allegedly guilty of, as mentioned above, a system of patronage in EU funding management is alleged to have favoured Orban's entourage, along with a lack of independence in Hungary's judiciary. *Last July the European Parliament made its position on Hungary and the Recovery Fund very clear: any government that violates the rule of law and fundamental freedoms is not entitled to European money,* this is the claim of the European Parliament. It is now a question of whether this stance will be endorsed by the Commission and the Council, where Orbán sits alongside a number of state and government leaders with a poor record of upholding human rights.

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