

A BALANCE IN THE FORCE? THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE HUNGARIAN ELECTIONS IN 2019

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Abstract

Using social media no longer acts as a novelty in political life, it has become a permanent instrument of political and electoral campaigns and political communication. Although political populism may not have gained space in recent years through social media alone, its impact on this process is unquestionable. Communication through social channels in principle can make a strong contribution to maintaining the social support of so-called populist governments. However, the question arises whether social media can be successfully used solely by the governing forces to enforce their political interests? In 2019, the general election of local municipal councillors and mayors in Hungary produced a very different results from the previous elections. In addition to the majority of the capital's districts, the opposition political forces have been successful in many of the municipalities that had a government-wide majority earlier in several electoral cycles. In our study - taking into account the results of the most recent elections — we examine the role of social media used by the political forces to influence the results.

Key words: *local elections, social media, local governments, Hungarian municipal system*

Foreword

The main topic of our research is the role of the social media in context of the local government elections of Hungary held in October of 2019. This paper is one of the first publications of the topic, so the reader should keep in mind that there isn't enough statistical data available yet, but its findings still could be a first step of a long-term and wider research.

To analyze the results of the Hungarian local government elections of 2019 the changing role of the social media in the last decade should been discussed, just as the system of the Hungarian local governments, the condition of the domestic broadcast media and its connections with the political parties, and finally the use of the broadcast- and social media during the elections.

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The role of social media

The technologies we call social media have unquestionably changed our world in the past decade. According to the literature (Miller et al. 2016, 2), before the appearance of the new technology, there were two main ways in which people communicated using media. The first was public broadcast media (such as television, radio and newspapers). With that kind of media anyone could be the audience. The other was the private communication. People could share their thoughts via telephone or direct e-mail, but it was mostly an interaction between two (or a few) persons.

As a result of the development of the internet, the polarization between public and private communication started to change. With web 2.0 many online forums appeared, and people finally had an opportunity to create or comment blogs. Those blogs and forums usually included just a few hundred people, so information couldn't be shared among many people this way.

Digital social media changed it all. The first platforms, like Myspace or especially Facebook were created to improve the private communication, with the possibility of making nearly unlimited numbers of so-called pages or groups, or share your thoughts to great audiences worldwide. In the short space of time since then social networking, video/picture sharing and 'tweeting' have become arguably the defining feature of contemporary Internet usage. It led to a phenomenon we often call as the user-generated internet.

As a result of the high popularity and easy accessibility of the social media platforms led to two consequences: First, the broadcast media appeared on the social media platforms. Newspapers, TV-channels and radio stations created their social media profiles or pages and started to share content on these platforms. So the differences between the public and private media slowly started to disappear.

The other consequence is the political impact. In 2011 the so-called "Arab spring" protest movements openly utilized social networking and file sharing tools to publicize and organize demonstrations (Abbot 2011, 30).

Based on those results political parties, movements and even the politicians themselves started to use the channels of the social media. In 2019 we are already able to see the role of using the social media on the presidential elections of the USA or the Brexit.

In the next chapters of this paper we will analyze the use of the social media of the Hungarian political parties in the context of the Hungarian Local elections which were held in 13th October 2019, but before this we have to examine the municipality model of Hungary.

The Hungarian model of local governments

During the 1990's the disappearance of centralized socialist forms of rule has led many countries toward increasingly minimalist government. The modern liberal democracy quickly became the dominant model for government. "In an effort to slim down and foster good governance, national governments have shed responsibility for providing citizens with basic services and implemented policies favouring decentralization. This increased the role for local governments who increasingly provide services that citizens have come to expect". (Lazin 2014, 59)

The Hungarian system of municipalities — transformed a couple years ago — was established at the time of the regime change, and its characteristics can in a large part be understood from the context of the regime change. As Gajdushek writes, "The intellectual context of the regime change can mostly be understood as the radical refusal of the former <communist> system. The most important characteristic of the former council system is that it operated basically as the part of a centralized system, therefore in the case of these bodies there could be no actual autonomy of municipalities. The negative feelings of the population concerning the council system were increased by the establishment of joint community councils." (Gajdushek 2012, 61) This happened in about the seventies. In the course of this such communities were forced into a single joint council between which centuries old conflicts existed, sometimes ethnical or religious, usually traced back to long forgotten reasons. Units created this way of course could not be interpreted as actual communities for the persons living in the individual settlements. Besides, the non-seat settlements of the joint councils felt that the central authority condemned them to gradually decline. As opposed to all this, the municipality act (Ötv.)³ created in the course of the regime change created new grounds for the municipality system. This act made it possible for all settlements to establish municipality organizations. This way the number of municipalities increased to double the former number, and the average number of residents became one of the lowest in Europe (Gajdushek 2012, 61). The domestic literature often refers to the so-called Southern and Northern municipality models. An example of the former is the French system, where every settlement is an independent municipality, but the municipalities have rather few independent tasks. The Northern systems (e.g. the British or Scandinavian municipalities) are characterized by a wide range of competences, but in these countries, larger municipalities operate, in which several smaller settlements belong to one municipal organization. In Hungary there is a third, mixed model, with all of the disadvantages of the two models. The country has nearly 3200 mu-

³ Act 65/1990 on local municipalities.

nicipalities, and before the 2010's every one of them had a high number of independent tasks and a high level of autonomy.

Realizing this, after 2010 the government decided to make some changes in this unsustainable system. The Parliament created the new act on municipalities in 2011. The governments answer was a significant reduction of the autonomy of municipalities, increasing state hierarchy (just like in the French system). The political system itself was a taboo, the reform did not really changed the political bodies, and the number of local politicians.

At this point we have to clear the numbers of the Hungarian local governments' political mandates. Budapest is the capital city, which has a capital mayor and twenty-three district mayors. There are two types of cities: cities with a county's rights (typically one in a county) and smaller towns, which the Hungarian laws also call cities regardless their size. The overall number of the cities is three hundred forty five. We call the other two thousands and nine settlements villages. Despite these high numbers all the cities and villages have a local mayor.

As we mentioned before the number of local representatives remained quite high compared to the less than 10 million inhabitants of the state. The more than three thousand settlements has more than three thousands mayors, and nearly seventeen thousands local representatives overall. The counties (middle-level) has also more than four hundred representatives so the elections was a race for more than 17,000 political mandates.⁴

The Hungarian broadcast media and the political parties

From the general elections of 2010 the FIDESZ party (with coalition of the small Christian-democratic party, the KDNP) has a constant, high majority in Hungary. The FIDESZ party clearly won all the three general elections in the period between 2010 and 2019. During this political era many important Hungarian acts were modified or repealed and new acts have been pronounced, including the constitution or the rule of elections. The Prime Minister Orbán Viktor often refers the new political system of Hungary as "illiberal democracy".

If we take a closer look to the traditional, public broadcast media (like newspapers, TV-channels and radio stations) we can see that most of them is connected somehow to the FIDESZ party, the supporters of the party or the government itself (Figure 1).

In this context it's a bit surprising that the parties of political opposition clearly won the local elections in the capital city and a in a great number of the major

⁴ See it detailed: https://www.valasztas.hu/elnyerheto-mandatumok_onk2019

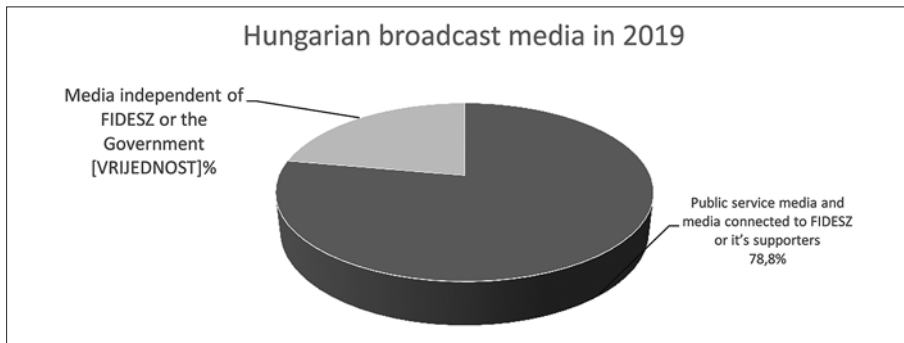


Figure 1 — Hungarian Broadcast media in 2019. Source: Mérték (2019).

cities in Hungary. The capitals's mayor became Gergely Karácsony from one of the opposition parties and only six of the districts' mayors remained FIDESZ-KDNP members. In nearly the half (ten of twenty-three) of the cities with county's rights (greatest cities of Hungary) the members of the political opposition's parties won the elections. The opposition wasn't as successful in the smaller cities and in the villages. The FIDESZ- and/or KDNP-supported candidates won the elections in nearly 71 percent of the lesser cities (population between 10,000 and 40 000). In the villages the situation is almost the same. According to the relevant statistical data 34% of the FIDESZ- and/or KDNP voters live in villages and 33% live in lesser towns. In contrast, the strongest party of the opposition (DK) is supported only a 13% of the village population [K.Á. — Szémann Tamás (2018)].

Summarizing the above, we can state that despite the strong urban results the opposition did not have won the elections, but the results are still surprising.

Social media — a key of success?

Why could the parties of the opposition could be so successful in the local elections of 2019? One reason is probably the cooperation against the FIDESZ. In Hungary we can't talk about a main political opposition party. The Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Democratic Coalition (DK) came from the political left wing, while the JOBBIK was originally a radical national party. There are also some quite new political formations: the LMP (founded in 2009) and MOMENTUM (founded in 2017). The latter is mainly referred as a liberal party by the parties of the right wing. This kind of diversity gave a kind of competitive advantage to the FIDESZ until now. In the local government elections those smaller parties could make an agreement and supported only one candidate asking their supporters to vote on this person. Could it be enough? The smaller parties tried this strategy on the general elections in 2018 too, but it didn't seem to work that time.

According to the most public opinion surveys the FIDESZ party has the weakest, and the relatively newly founded MOMENTUM has the strongest support among the people of the age between eighteen and twenty-nine. (Table 1.).

Table 1 — Supporters of the Hungarian political parties by age in 2019 (%).

Source: Median (2019).

	18-29 yrs	30-39 yrs	40-49 yrs	50-59 yrs	60+ yrs
FIDESZ	35	50	43	45	43
DK	4	8	6	11	15
MSZP	3	4	10	7	12
Momentum	16	8	4	4	2
Jobbik	9	5	9	6	4
LMP	2	6	2	4	1
Other	4	1	2	4	3
Has no preference	27	18	24	19	20

The oldest group of people (age sixty or above) supports mostly the FIDESZ, but the support of the relatively old Socialist Party and the Democratic Coalition (led by the socialist party's last prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány) is also high amongst them. We have to notice that the support of the newly formed parties of the last 10-15 years (Momentum, Jobbik, LMP) is quite low in the oldest people of the country.

The members of this latter group are hard to reach with the tools of the social media, so public broadcast media is probably a better way to contact them. Unlike this, people of the age between eighteen and forty-four are the most reachable using the tools of the social media (Figure 2.). These generations don't seem to be too supportive for the socialist parties, but many people amongst them prefers the newer and smaller parties.

The next question is what did the FIDESZ and the political opposition do with those numbers?

The FIDESZ and media organizations connected to Fidesz spent a total of four hundred-eleven thousand euros on Facebook ads, while the opposition spent six hundred and eight thousand euros (Facebook Ad Library Report 2019). As the results show us, the opposing forces used the potentials of the social media better, and they probably could mobilize more people this way. Due to the lack of traditional media interfaces available to it, the opposition had no choice but to use social media as vigorously as possible (László and Molnár 2019, 33). We also have to keep in mind that the key of success is not only that how much we pay for ads on Facebook, but we also have to learn how to use it. One analysis (Ynsight Research

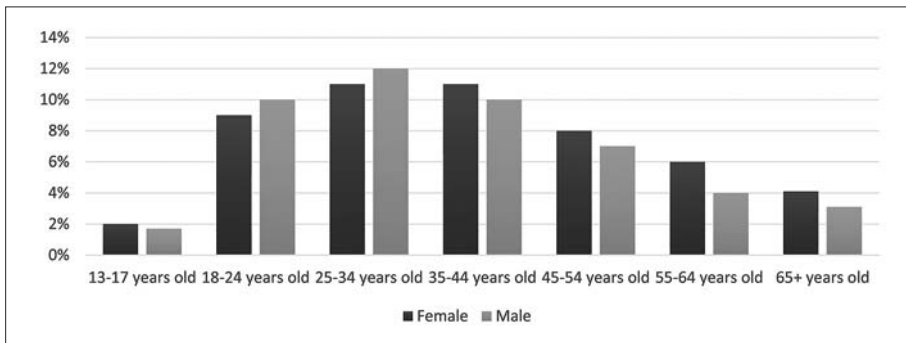


Figure 2 — Social media audience in Hungary (2019). Source: WeAreSocial (2019).

— Silberstein and Partners 2020) pointed out that less candidates of the FIDESZ-KDNP had an own Facebook page than the oppositionist.

The candidates of the FIDESZ-KDNP had a lower level of activity on social media and they have reached a very low level of engagement of the followers.

The reactions of the FIDESZ-supporting media confirms that. One of the most influential pro-government online portals came to the following conclusion: “The next election and the future itself depends on how could we reach them (the younger generations) with the suitable messages on the online platforms they use” (Ferkó 2019).

Conclusion

In the paper we have presented that the proper use of the social media’s tools could affect the results of municipal elections. We could see the impacts of it during the latest local governments’ elections of Hungary. In a country where the governing party has a very high influence on the traditional, public broadcast media the use of the new, social media tools can be a true counterweight.

The government recognized that, so we are waiting for new tendencies of their communication techniques, especially on the field of the social media.

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