



‘Celebrity Survivor’ Time for Remaining Socialist Mayors

Meet the most prominent MSZP candidates who may put small dents in Fidesz’ aura of invincibility and find out why

Until 2002, municipal elections were more or less merry affairs for most of the major political parties because unlike national elections with their strict ‘either or’ concept of victory, local elections usually allow for everybody to claim victory by cherry-picking the contests they emphasise.

Since 2002, however, municipal elections have become so one-sided that the losing parties’ few victories were not enough to cloud the overall tendency. That year the Socialists swept most of the country, save for the three conservative bastions in western Hungary. MSZP ran high in popular esteem on account of the most massive increase in state spending since regime transition.

In 2006, the elections came just on the heels of the release of Ferenc Gyurcsány’s leaked Balatonőszöd speech delivered only a few months before – the timing was a true miracle if there ever was one. The result was an epic rout, which is likely to be repeated this year, except it’s going to be even worse for the Socialists.

After the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition lost several big towns – some of which were considered leftwing strongholds – in 2006, including Eger, Veszprém and Győr, as well as Pécs in a by-election in 2009, it now stands to lose – among other high profile targets – Székesfehérvár (the popular but disaffected Socialist mayor accepted a position as the deputy director of the State Audit Office), Nyíregyháza (the incumbent might have had a fighting chance but declined to run) and of course Budapest (analysed in Week 34 newsletter), leaving very little of the country with the left in charge.

This will naturally enhance the significance of the few remaining municipalities where MSZP can hold on. The stature of the few remaining Socialist mayors will rise within the left and they can be expected to exert a greater impact on the development of the largest opposition party.

Generally, being an opposition mayor in a country where government politicians of all stripes routinely threaten settlements who voted for the opposition with love (read: money) deprivation is not always an attractive scenario. On the other hand, precisely to counter this impression, the government sometimes treats at least some of these municipalities with surprising generosity; with so few major targets in left-wing hands, some of these municipalities might benefit from a desire to showcase them.



Below therefore is a selection of the most prominent MSZP mayors who aren't certainly doomed, along with a brief analysis of why they stand a chance despite the ruling party's popularity.

József Tóth – Budapest, 13th district

Though it was a 12% decline from his peak of 72% in 2002, with nearly 60% of the votes in 2006 József Tóth was the best performing Socialist mayor in Budapest. He reinforced his status as the safest MSZP incumbent by becoming the party's only candidate to finish in first place in his constituency in the first round of the 2010 parliamentary election, and was one of only two to ultimately win his seat directly. The fact that the only other constituency held by MSZP is also part of his municipal district, the 13th of Budapest, will certainly improve his chances – this slice of the capital has emerged as curiously resistant to Fidesz, even more so than some other districts where MSZP used to be stronger. But it is not all due to the left-wing loyalties of the population: despite his lack of charisma, Tóth is respected for a variety of reasons. The district has been developing well and managed to remain remarkably debt free in the process. Moreover, the mayor has been known to be critical of the MSZP leadership in the city, a stance that was vindicated when former deputy mayor and Budapest MSZP éminence grise Miklós Hagyó was arrested on charges of corruption.

László Botka – Szeged

Botka is somewhat of an anomaly because Szeged is not a Socialist stronghold. In 1998, Fidesz won all three of Szeged's three parliamentary constituencies (in fact Csongrád county, home to Szeged, has always been one of the most MSZP-resistant eastern counties) and carried the mayoralty, too. Botka was swept into office with the red tide of 2002, but he became very popular on his own merits: in 2006, when the red tide went out and gave way to the Fidesz wave, Botka was re-elected with a mere two percent loss (58%) as compared to 2002 (60%). While a series of MSZP bastions fell, it was Botka's personal appeal and success as mayor that kept the swing voters of Szeged loyal to him. Though he lost his constituency (consisted of Szeged and the usually more conservative surrounding villages) in April, voters may well want to retain him as mayor. If they choose to do so, it won't have any implications for the party at large, except for reinforcing Botka's status as one of the key MSZP players who have declined to run for major party offices.

Sándor Káli – Miskolc

Káli is not only fighting for his own political survival, but he is also a bit of a canary in the landmine for his entire party. If MSZP is to regain its position as the main challenger to Fidesz, the process must begin here, where the Socialists were once unassailable but where



they have also crashed most spectacularly in April. Even at its peak, MSZP was never really entrenched in (most of) the western parts of the country; outside Budapest, it was primarily in former heavy industrial areas such as Miskolc and Ózd where it held safe seats. Now, Jobbik has emerged as a major force in these areas. While political analysts quibble over whether Jobbik's 20-30% of the vote in the region is mostly composed of former MSZP voters or former non-voters and Fidesz voters (with Fidesz picking up scores of Socialist voters in turn), the fact is that to become competitive again MSZP needs to regain significant portions of the lost votes. Káli has personally felt the Jobbik squeeze on account of ethnic tensions in the city. Most notably, the mayor had to walk a tight rope when the city's police chief argued that the controversial term 'Gypsy criminality' – Jobbik's main political slogan – was a proper way to describe certain categories of petty crime and stood to be sacked by the Socialist government in response. Along with the rest of the city, Káli stood up for his police chief, but nevertheless managed to head off a major conflict with his party in the process. His personal popularity might help him hold on the mayoralty – even though he lost his electoral district (Miskolc 3) by a whopping 16%. But if it happens, it will be a late gift from the time when the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition had a two-thirds majority of its own: in 1994 the government abolished the second round run-off in municipal elections. This means that with a divided right Káli might squeeze by, though based on the April results his chances are slim.

Gyula Molnár – Budapest, 11th district

As a popular and fairly successful mayor, a little while ago Molnár would have been a strong contender. He has been damaged, however, by – thus far unproven – allegations of corruption, including a statement by one of the accused in the Zuschlag-affair claiming that he was involved in the infamous corruption scheme. Even though it is unclear whether he is implicated, 'Zuschlag' is a name most Socialist politicians would never want to hear in one sentence with their own name. Furthermore, his district is far less uniformly left-leaning than Tóth's and had been governed by the right before, not to mention that in two of the municipalities' parliamentary constituencies Fidesz scored overwhelming victories in April (one has always been a rightwing bastion). To survive therefore, Molnár – who had performed decently in his own 11th district constituency in April – depends mostly on his record and personal appeal. But we won't know how much the latter has suffered until October 3.



Other races to watch

In the “pre-Jobbik” era Kazincbarcika was the Socialist bastion par excellence, with 60% plus results easily within reach. Now the situation is very similar to Miskolc: the Socialist mayor Péter Szitka lost the district by 12% in April and faces an uphill battle.

Szombathely is another swing town (in what is arguably Hungary’s most conservative county) where the MSZP mayor, György Ipkovich – barely – held on in 2006. Ipkovich’s advantage is that unlike in eastern Hungary, Jobbik (which is weak here) is more likely to draw votes from Fidesz only. A recorded conversation between (presumable) businessmen alleging corruption by two local Fidesz politicians may give Ipkovich some boost. But overall, the even harsher headwind is likely to evaporate his 1%, 300 vote lead in 2006.

The MSZP candidates’ chances in some of Budapest’s working class or partly working class districts 10, 18, 19, 20, 21 (MSZP candidates won all of these in 2006 despite the considerable headwind), are further enhanced by the fact that LMP – which drew a lot of left-wing votes in April – mayoral candidates did not make it on the ballot, while Jobbik politicians did. There are chances that at least one or two of these districts will stay in the MSZP column.