

# Democracy or autocracy? Kerek-Barczy on Hungarian election 2014

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DK candidate for parliament Szabolcs Kerek-Barczy on Hungarian election 2014

*“The stakes are very high in this upcoming election. People must decide whether they want to live in a full democracy, have a Western lifestyle, have their civil liberties respected, and whether they want their human dignity restored. They will decide whether they want to move away from non-transparent oligarchic management of taxpayers’ money, and whether they want to join the Europe and transatlantic club of clean economic and financial dealings. This election will give people the chance to decide whether they want to live in a republic, or whether we want to live in a Byzantine- or Eastern-type of authoritarian or autocratic regime.”*

Senior reporter Benjamin Novak recently interviewed Democratic Coalition (DK) candidate for parliament Szabolcs Kerek-Barczy about Hungarian election 2014.

*Thanks for taking the time to speak with us. Tell about your background.*

I'm Szabolcs Kerek-Barczy, and I am a member of the Democratic Coalition's executive committee. Our party is a democratic opposition party here in Hungary. I am a graduate of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government where I received a Masters degree in Public Policy. I have worked in politics for some time, and also have worked for the government during various periods. I started under the Antall government, and later as a diplomat during the first Orban government as Consulate General of Los Angeles, where you and I first met. I've worked in the private sector at MATAV, and at a boutique mergers and acquisitions firm in the mid-2000s.

*Elections are coming up on April 6th. You'll be running on the Democratic Coalition's ticket. Why did you join the Democratic Coalition?*

I joined the party last October. I was a member of the Hungarian Democratic Forum from 2007-2010. MDF was the only party I had been a member of prior to when I joined the Democratic Coalition. Earlier in my career, I was more interested in governance than party politics.

I was invited to join the Democratic Coalition by (party chairman) Ferenc Gyurcsany. As the name implies, our party is a coalition and the political home of moderate social democrats, moderate liberals, and moderate conservatives. I happen to represent the 'liberal conservatives', if you will. This term makes no sense in Anglo-Saxon countries.

*Like center-left?*

Not really. I don't think these ideological terms are so applicable anymore. Their meanings have changed quite a bit over the last 50-60 years, and mean different things in different countries, especially in Hungary.

*What are your values?*

I believe in a transparent, non-corrupt, and small government. I also believe in strong social solidarity. I believe in subsidiarity, which means you leave the decision with the people and with the communities. I don't believe in a large centralized government.

At the same time, I also believe in regulated but free market economy, and the dominance of a private ownership and the private sector in a country. That's the exact opposite of what the current government is doing in this country.

*How did you become involved with the Democratic Coalition?*

I had been writing political essays for newspapers, and I was also actively taking part in political shows on television and radio. I thought it wasn't enough for me to be a political essayist and independent intellectual, and found it important to make my

voice heard in the political arena as well. I wanted to do as much as I could to help like-minded people also wanting to see change. I decided to join like-minded people in the Democratic Coalition and got to work by giving voice to our concerns about the current government. We want to offer the voters something else. We thought it very important to try and attract those potential voters who have been very passive in recent years. I wanted to do more, I wanted to be more active in actual party politics.

*You're the Democratic Coalition's candidate for Budapest's first electoral district, which is in downtown Budapest.*

Not just downtown. The Fidesz government did quite a bit of gerrymandering which means they redrew all individual electoral constituencies. Essentially, they've blown-up the more than 20 year old consensus in that regard. My electoral district consists of the entire I. and V. districts of Budapest, so it includes both areas on both sides of the Danube. The first electoral district also includes some parts of Budapest's 8th and 9th districts.

*That makes for a rather interesting demographic.*

Yes, it's a very interesting demographic and very interesting geographic spread.

*Speaking of interesting spreads, you'll be running against Fidesz parliamentary delegation head and 5th district mayor Antal Rogan, Politics Can Be Different (LMP) co-chair Andras Schiffer, and also Jobbik's Mrs. Lorant Hegedus (wife of controversial Reformed minister Lorant Hegedus). What makes the race in this electoral district so interesting is that each candidate is pretty well known. How would you define your supporters?*

I speak to a moderate voter base. I engage those who are pro-democracy, those who favor the rule of law instead of an authoritarian and autocratic system. I represent those who want to decide their future for themselves instead of handing over this responsibility to somebody else. I represent those who believe in transparency instead of the state of mafiosos like we see today. I stand with those who oppose Hungary's current non-democratic, oligarchic, and mafia-like tendencies.

But I'm reaching out to people who are uncertain about their own political activism, those who dislike what they see today but haven't yet felt motivated enough to participate in elections. This includes moderate conservatives and moderate liberals who have been deterred from political participation by the arrogance of Fidesz and by the questionable political dealings of the past 24 years. I think I am able to deliver very good messages to them. I have remained very consistent in my political position in the past, and am offering these "liberal conservative" values to Budapest's voters.

*Sounds like something Fidesz would say.*

Fidesz says a lot of things. Fidesz started out as a radical liberal party, later they tried to white-wash themselves and appear as a moderate civic- or conservative party,

which was certainly a lie. Now it's an extreme-left wing, extreme demagogue, nationalistic, mafia-type of party. This is clearly demonstrated in their way of governance.

*I was being facetious.*

I know, I'm just pointing out that I have stayed steady in the past two decades. I'm in the same place I was five years ago, ten years ago. I think these voters are thirsty for consistency and transparency, frankness, and openness in politics. I think I can show them that traditional values and a progressive approach to policy and political issues can exist hand-in-hand peacefully and efficiently. They can count on me 'doing as I say'. I try to be consistent in delivering my messages and acting according to my promises.

*What's at stake in this election?*

I think the stakes are very high in this upcoming election. People must decide whether they want to live in a full democracy, have a Western lifestyle, have their civil liberties respected, and whether they want their human dignity restored. They will decide whether they want to move away from non-transparent oligarchic management of taxpayers' money, and whether they want to join the Europe and transatlantic club of clean economic and financial dealings. This election will give people the chance to decide whether they want to live in a republic, or whether we want to live in a Byzantine- or Eastern-type of authoritarian or autocratic regime.

*I sense you're not a fan of the Prime Minister.*

Unfortunately, Viktor Orban is not running for parliament in any of the 106 constituencies. I'll be running against his alter ego, Fidesz incumbent Antal Rogan. So this particular constituency is where Orban can be defeated.

*What do you mean?*

Rogan Antal, before becoming the parliamentary group leader of Fidesz, had been one of the most influential Fidesz politicians. Rogan is the alter ego of Orban. Rogan embodies Fidesz's 'National Cooperation Regime'. Rogan is the embodiment of taking private ownership and private savings away from people, as illustrated by the bill he introduced which nationalized private pensions in 2010. He is responsible for curbing the freedom of the press, again, clearly evident in another bill he introduced commonly known as 'media law'.

He personifies the poor economic performance of this country. He played a significant role in the increasing of Hungary's external debt as he was behind many of the laws that had prevented economic growth. Rogan is member of the same mafia state which deprived 30 thousand individuals and their families of the right to sell tobacco in their little convenience stores. He is behind the – to put it politely – questionable land anti-reforms.

Rogan embodies the cooperation between Fidesz and Jobbik. You might remember the strategic political contract made between Fidesz and Jobbik in this district. Rogan was one of the greatest supporters of the statue Fidesz wants to build at Freedom Square which depicts Hungary as the victim of the Nazi invasion instead of showing Hungary as the active and willing participant of deportation and murder of hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews and other “undesirables” in this country.

Rogan represents Fidesz’s intention to attract neo-nazi and extreme right-wing voters to Fidesz. There are very serious intentions in Fidesz’s gestures to the Jobbik voter base.

*I remember spotting you in a crowd in the 5th district’s Freedom Square that was protesting the dedication of a controversial bust of Hungarian wartime leader Admiral Miklos Horthy.*

Yes, I was there. I also held a press conference at the event.

*It sounds like you’re offering Budapest’s 1. Electoral District voters the exact opposite of what Antal Rogan has given the country. You often say that Hungary needs to move away from the ‘mutyik’ (corruption) towards a much more transparent public policy strategy, restore human dignity, and restore civil liberties. There’s quite a bit of hype surrounding the election for parliamentary representation of Budapest’s 1st Electoral District for other reasons, too.*

I’m telling voters that if they want to say ‘no’ to the current regime, where else to say ‘no’ than if not in the electoral district where Orban’s alter ego is running for parliament. This whole Orban and Fidesz regime can be defeated right here. I’ve raised the stakes and have said that this district will be deciding on a quasi-referendum about the Orban regime. Rogan is nothing short of an Orban. He is Orban himself in a different body. They have the same intentions, the same dirty dealing, the same cynicism, the same syphoning out of taxpayer money into private pockets, the same mud-slinging, the same oligarchic management of the country, the same kind of corruption.

My agenda represents a 180 degree turn from what Fidesz is doing. I am daring the people to say ‘No!’ to the regime, to say ‘No!’ to Orban.

*You mentioned the gerrymandering that has taken place since Fidesz came to power in 2010, but there have also been significant changes to Hungary’s election law. Any concerns about the fairness of a democratic election in Hungary?*

Definitely. Look, one must consider the ‘fairness’ of Hungary’s elections in more than one context. Fairness means equal access to the press. Fairness means that each political party must produce transparent documentation for campaign financing.

There should also be fairness when it comes to accessibility of political advertising before an election.

*The ruling Fidesz party recently passed legislation that severely restricted opposition parties' ability to campaign through political advertisements. The city has been blanketed with pro-government billboards and what many consider to be distasteful posters slamming a wide array of opposition party candidates which was paid for by an NGO called Civil Unity, or CÖF.*

Exactly. This organization launched a totally negative smear campaign. Just as Rogan is the alter ego of Orban, CÖF is the alter ego Fidesz. We cannot change the fact that at the moment Fidesz has access to infinite amounts of government funds for the purposes of their campaign, whereas we don't. If I would exceed my official campaign budget by HUF 2 thousand, police would come to pick me up. That's why I've decided to do the moral thing and make my campaign completely transparent.

*There have been multiple calls from a variety of NGOs, political parties, and civil liberties groups to have international observers monitor Hungary's 2014 elections.*

Yes, but I'm not sure whether any international groups have committed to monitoring the elections. A couple of observers would not be enough. We would need observers and experts in every part of the country. A few hundred observers would be necessary. We have also asked international observers to monitor how voting will take place outside the country. Unfortunately, there are also risks for procedural improprieties in how the voting will take place outside the country as well.

*Ambassador-designate Colleen Bell drew criticism from Hungary's pro-government media for statements she made in her testimony before the Senate's Committee on Foreign Affairs. While highlighting many of the United States' shared values and partnership objectives, Colleen Bell voiced concerns raised about the state of democracy in Hungary. Recently, a group of US senators was in Budapest. Republican Senator John McCain made statements which seemed to be a bit more critical than the statements made by Bell during her testimony before the Foreign Affairs Committee. Do you feel like Hungary's dignity has been insulted, or that the nation's sovereignty is being challenged?*

John Kerry also delivered a speech last week at a conference on international security held in Munich. He spoke about the disturbing developments concerning the state of democracy in Central Eastern Europe – he didn't say Southeast Europe, the Balkans, or only in Eastern Europe. He said Central Eastern Europe. Central Eastern Europe refers to Hungary.

So, to answer your question: no, I don't think these are attacks on Hungary. The state of democracy, human rights, human dignity, transparency, and the rule of law, are all international values. These are global values.

We joined the European Union, we joined NATO. These are alliances of common values and principles. When the rights of Hungarians in neighboring countries are attacked we have the right to step up for them. Whenever people are persecuted because of their beliefs anywhere in the world, our government can step up

individually or in concert with the European Union or NATO to take a stand against those committing such atrocities. This is absolutely fair and just. It is also a must. We have to do that, we must do that.

In the future when the US ambassador, a very important United States Senator, or a Secretary of State of the United States goes to great lengths to highlight these issues in a polite and diplomatic manner, what they are doing is sending us a message. It should be interpreted as a sign that our closest allies sense some disturbing elements in the air. Nobody should take that as an offense. We do the same when we find something disturbing is happening in Western countries or the countries of our allies. This happens every day in the European Union. I take no offense to these remarks and I don't think the United States is out to get us. We are friends, we are allies. It's absolutely fair. The US is saying what NGOs, think-tanks, civil liberties groups, human rights groups, and what all democratic Hungarians are also saying.

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