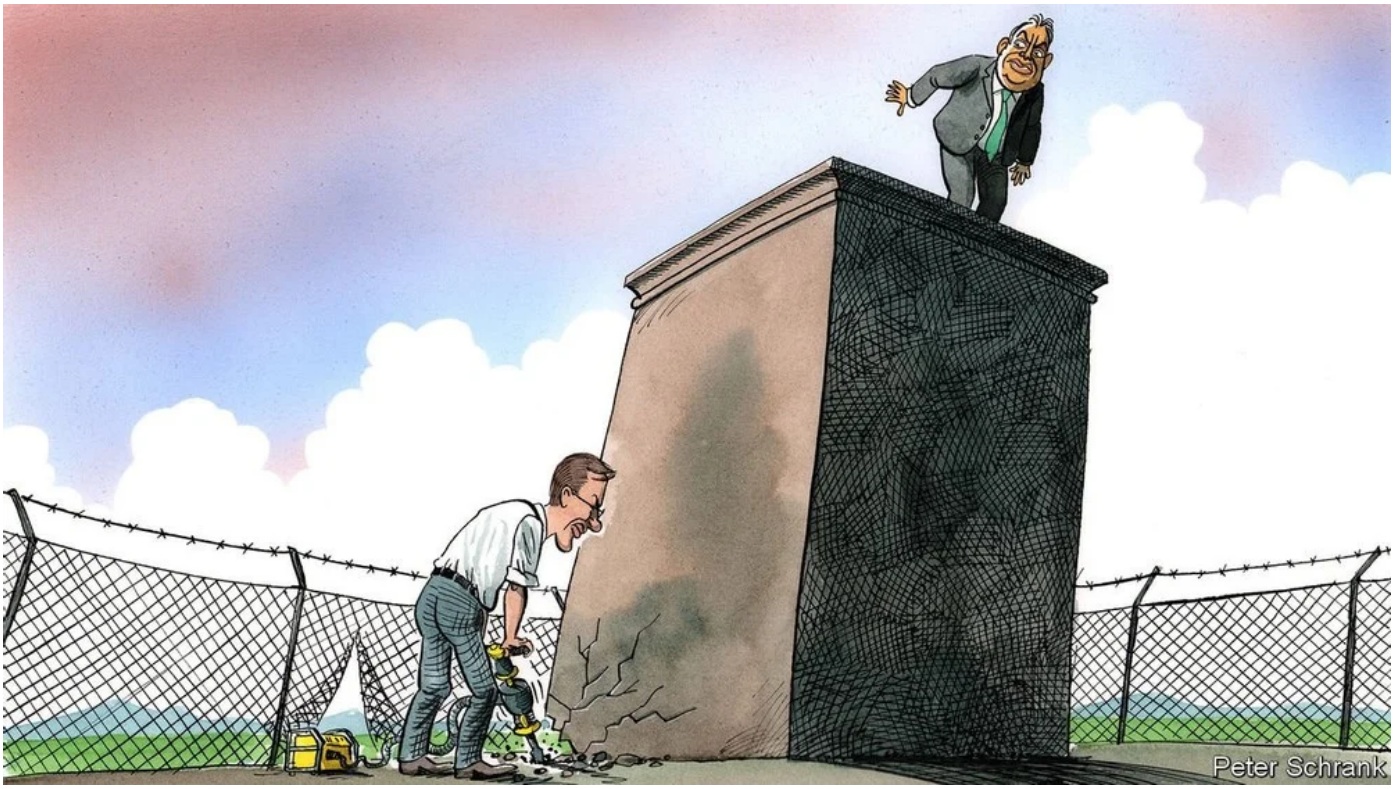
Charlemagne

Meet the man who could oust Viktor Orban, Hungary's strongman

Gergely Karacsony wants his country to stop being a byword for cronyism



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GERGELY KARACSONY, the mayor of Budapest, and Viktor Orban, the prime minister of Hungary, could not be less alike. Mr Karacsony presides over the cosmopolitan capital; Mr Orban counts on the rural hinterland as his base. Mr Orban has near-total control over Fidesz, the party that has had near-total control of Hungary since 2010; Mr Karacsony owes his job to an ungainly alliance of six parties. The football-mad Mr Orban built a 3,800-seat stadium in his home village (population: 1,700); Mr Karacsony, a former academic

his home village (population: 1,700), Mr Karacsony, a former academic, campaigned against an expensive athletics stadium in his city (population: 1,000 times larger). For anyone still struggling to tell the difference, Mr Karacsony helpfully points out that: "He is short and fat, and I am tall and slim."

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Like the differences between Mr Karacsony and Mr Orban, Hungarian politics is now refreshingly clear-cut. It is Mr Orban's Fidesz party versus everyone else. After losing badly in all three general elections since 2010, Mr Karacsony's party and the other main opposition groups have teamed up to bring down Mr Orban in next year's vote. Individually, these parties were happy to poll in double digits. Together the alliance, which ranges from the formerly far-right Jobbik to socialists via centrist liberals, is polling level with Fidesz, in the high 40s. For the first time in more than a decade, someone has a chance of booting Mr Orban out.

Attention has turned to who will lead the charge. A primary to choose the opposition's candidate for prime minister will kick off the process this summer. Mr Karacsony's surprise victory in Budapest in 2019 was the first example of this approach succeeding. The 45-year old pollster-turned-politician won the primary on the basis of being the least objectionable candidate, able to garner support from voters with often wildly different views. Two years on and Mr Karacsony polls ahead of potential rivals for prime minister, yet he is still coy about whether he will eventually stand. Dithering adds to the common criticism of Mr Karacsony that his natural meekness looks more like weakness to some voters.

The choice of candidate will dictate the choice of strategy. Mr Karacsony revels in a reputation as a peacemaker, able to heal differences between his diverse supporters. He is reluctant to fight Mr Orban on his own terms. If Mr Orban feeds on confrontation, then it is best not to feed him, runs the logic. Other potential candidates adopt a more abrasive tone. Peter Jakab, the leader of the formerly far-right Jobbik, recently told Mr Orban: "I've never seen a coward such

formerly far-right jobbik, recently told Mr Orban: "I've never seen a coward such as you." (He was also once fined for trying to hand Mr Orban a sack of potatoes in parliament, accusing him of vegetable-based electoral bungs.)

Whether Mr Karacsony's manner will work outside the capital is unknown. In Hungary, politics is as much about geography as ideology. In Budapest, home to one in five Hungarians, residents rely on still-vibrant online Hungarian media; in the countryside, pro-government radio and tabloids rule. Last October the opposition failed to win a by-election in a rural seat, despite ganging up. As well as picking a potential prime minister, the parties must also arrange 106 primaries for individual constituencies this summer.

Those keen on helping from abroad should steer clear. Well-meaning foreign interventions are not always welcome, says Mr Karacsony. Mr Orban loves to portray his enemies as globalist puppets, taking their orders from Brussels. Over-enthusiastic international support for the opposition can backfire. But a change in the international atmosphere does help. Patience among Mr Orban's European allies ran out earlier this year, when the Hungarian leader quit the powerful European People's Party club of centre-right politicians before he was pushed. Mr Orban's reputation as a canny operator on the European stage has been dented.

Elections in Hungary are free but unfair. Ballot boxes are not stuffed; opposition politicians are not disappeared. Still, gerrymandering is rife, state media spout propaganda and opposition parties find their state funding cut at short notice. Even so, talk of dictatorship is overdone: Mr Orban can lose and he knows it. Recent steps such as shunting Hungary's universities into private structures run by Mr Orban's cronies show he plans to cling to some power, even if he loses office. "They are building a deep state," says Peter Kreko of Political Capital, a think-tank. "If you are confident, then you do not build that."

And now for something completely different

Yet winning will still be the easiest part of the process. If it reaches office, the opposition will have the task of "de-Orbanisation": unpicking a state that Mr Orban has devised to enrich his friends and entrench his politics. This will take years. To explain the challenge, Mr Karacsony quotes Ralf Dahrendorf, an Anglo-German political scientist, who once said it takes six months to write a constitution, six years to develop a market economy and 60 years to change a society. Keeping the coalition together in the country at large will prove harder

than in Budapest. At the moment, the opposition parties have little choice but to stick together. If they do, they could win. If they don't, they almost certainly won't. This concentrates minds. Once in office, they may find the slow task of unpicking of Mr Orban's deep state less thrilling than the campaign trail, so they will have to strain to stay united.

Get it right, however, and there is a bigger prize than reforming Hungary. Mr Orban provided a how-to guide for the EU's band of wannabe autocrats. A small, poor landlocked country with an impenetrable language became one of the most influential countries in the bloc, for entirely negative reasons. The Hungarian method of grinding down democratic norms has been adopted elsewhere, from Poland to Bulgaria to Slovenia. Infighting and ineptitude from the opposition allowed Mr Orban to embed himself in the Hungarian state over a decade. For years, Hungary has provided an example of what not to do. If Mr Karacsony and his allies succeed, it could for once prove an example worth following. ■

This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "The anti-Orban"

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