



Shorten the Campaign Period!

Our main proposals:

- The period of campaign activities should be limited, while enacting legislation that shortens the campaign period
- It is necessary to introduce a campaign period of 15-30 days in Hungary
- All party-related advertisements must be banned outside the official campaign period
- Along with the introduction of a shorter timeframe, equal opportunity must be given to all campaigning organizations with regards to the accessibility of all media channels

The campaign period in Hungary lasts at least two-and-a-half months, which is due to the fact that in accordance with the current rules and legislation, parties may begin canvassing from the moment the exact election date is announced and the head of state must make his decision public 72 days prior to election day at the latest. In practice, however, even this already lax timeframe is not applied for lack of strict regulations. The “official campaign” and the PR competition (and spin) of the months leading up to the campaign period melt together. In several European countries, including numerous states in Central and East Europe there are precise and strict rules that define the exact length of the campaign period. Wherever laws and regulations have been enacted to control the procedure, the campaign period is shorter than in Hungary. It is thus indispensable to define a precise time frame for campaigns, and simultaneously introduce new regulations that shorten the campaign periods in Hungary.

SHORT CAMPAIGN PERIODS IN EUROPE

Spain	Under the Elections Act, election campaign may begin 38 days after announcing the date of Election Day
Slovenia	Under the Elections and Referendum Act, the first campaign day is the 30th day before Election Day
Great-Britain	As it takes place in the birthplace of the common law jurisdiction, the campaign period usually starts anywhere from five to eight weeks prior Election Day
The Czech Republic	Broadcast and various types of outdoor media are made available for campaigning parties from the 16th day prior Election Day
Slovakia	In accordance with the provisions of the relevant Act, political and campaign messages may be put forward in various media from the 21st day before Election Day
Italy	Under the law and regulations that have not been amended for several decades, parties may begin their campaign advertising from the 30th day before Election Day.

Source: Nézőpont Intézet [Perspective Institute]

A precisely regulated and brief campaign period has three advantages: First, it contributes to a level playfield between small and big parties, second, it prevents the incumbent party from becoming ineffective in government due to lengthy election fights, and finally, it protects the public from being overly exposed to the “continuous campaign”, thus preserving the public agenda for meaningful political issues up until the weeks immediately preceding the elections.

Competition and Restraint

Shorter campaign periods make for less expensive elections. Although at first it may seem as a merely trivial technical consideration, it is in fact an overarching factor affecting the entire political system. Assuming that political campaigns are characterized by party overspending, it is easy to see how unrestricted campaigns put smaller parties, as well as any interest group arguing in favour of a specific policy, at a disadvantage. As these organizations cannot rely on expensive advertising and other broadcast media, as opposed to the larger parties, they cannot run long *and* intensive campaigns, instead, they must opt for either a long *and* restricted campaign or a short *and* intensive one.

A shortened campaign period that would result in trimmed advertisement spending is very much in line with the public morale in 2009. In a time of economic crisis when calls for budget restraints are constantly emphasized both in the business sector, as well as in every day life, it is a valid reaction of the public to expect political actors to show self-restraint as well. The reforms aiming at a shorter and a more balanced political race would prove that parties respond to the constituents' needs.

Campaign and Governance

One of the most important, albeit seemingly trivial advantages of a shorter campaign period would be the ability of the incumbent party to focus on its duties, instead of shouldering the campaign efforts simultaneously. The long line of hustings, the need to participate at rallies and campaign tours all undoubtedly hinder the efficacy of the government, as members of the government, or the governing party representatives must carry out the tasks related to their office, while focusing on the campaign in parallel. In some countries, the situation is

resolved by various well-established practices of the political forces. In Romania, for example, members of the government take an unpaid leave of absence in order to fully participate in the campaign. This solution, however does not tackle the issue of how the executive authority can continue to carry out its tasks and programs.

A shorter campaign period and a strict set of rules and regulations could answer the challenge. Although high government officials (the prime minister, the ministers and state secretaries), as opposed to the public bodies they are the head of, cannot and should not be excluded from participating in the campaigns, the shorter time frame for campaigning would ease their burdens related to it, while also enabling them to focus on their government offices.

Ending the „Continuous Campaign”

Aside from considerations of efficacy and that it would be economically justified, the third benefit of a shorter campaign period would be that it would put an end to the “continuous campaign”, as today there is no clear difference between the actual campaign and the preceding period. It would be an important achievement both from a financial as well as from a cultural point of view. If parties are allowed to put forward their platform and messages only during a limited period of time, the potential misuse of funds by invoices issued ahead of time would not be possible as the political forces could not incur any cost related to campaign financing before the official campaign kick-off day. The public would benefit even more from a much calmer atmosphere, in contrast with the overheated rhetoric of the campaigns can run for six months. Pre-campaigning period would disappear altogether, as well as the endless series of image campaigns, mass rallies and whistlestop tours. Several examples illustrate what happens in foreign countries where an unregulated pre-campaign period gets too close in time to Election Day

due to an abridged official competition period, resulting in mudslinging, and an “overheated”, negative public discourse by the time the real campaign begins.

**OFFICIAL ADVERTISEMENT EXPENDITURES BEFORE THE OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN PERIOD
(SEPTEMBER-JANUARY)**

Party	2001-2002	2005-2006
MSZP	9.63	583.48
Fidesz	0.46	215.37
SZDSZ	13.35	137.18
MDF	0.00	11.90

(in HUF million) TNS Media Intelligence

Any regulation prescribing a shorter campaign period can only be effective and have truly beneficial results if the campaign is strictly and clearly separated in nature from the period preceding it, and if it is clearly stipulated by law. Based on the most progressive cases and examples in foreign countries, it is suggested that Hungary adopts a 15 to 30-day-long campaign period. During that period, all paid media and other communication channels would be accessible to the parties, NGOs, and leading civil organizations as well as special interest groups, with imposable obligations for transparency that are yet to be introduced. Also, during the official campaign period these organizations should be able to stage campaign events and rallies without having to announce them.

Simultaneously, however, it is necessary to ban all party-affiliated, party-related advertisements in every format, including paid media, online, indoor and outdoor media, television and radio outside the official campaign period. The organization

of campaign events, however, should not be banned in a similar vein, with a notification submitted ahead, parties should be allowed to stage these outside the campaign period. The most sweeping argument in favour of this is that participants in the political race should be given the opportunity to appear at many forums during the candidate nomination period already (when getting out the vote in support of nominating certain candidates, called “the registration-nomination slips” in Hungary), as it is particularly difficult for parties outside the parliament to make public appearances due to their low-budget campaigns.

Constitutional Considerations

An election campaign is not simply a race for the votes, rather, it is a medium for expanding the freedom of communication in order to have a more extensive space for competing opinions if compared to the circumstances outside the campaign period. Every relevant piece of legislation brings down the barriers normally in place, outside the campaign periods that is, including the obligatory, timely notification of rallies, gatherings, meetings and demonstrations, strict and lawful ways of erecting political advertising and campaign signs or the ban on purchasing civilian databases for the purposes of political direct-marketing etc...)

By shortening the campaign period, the expansion of the freedom of communication would be thus simultaneously restricted. That can only be done if it is done in accordance with the constitutional requirements, in the name of the pluralism of opinions and accessibility of information for all constituents. Along with the introduction of a shorter timeframe, equal opportunity must be given to all campaigning organizations with regards to the accessibility of all media channels.