

A collaborative research paper prepared by  
21 Research Center and Projekt: Polska

# Minding the gap:

## Deepening political polarisation in Poland and Hungary

Political preferences of people in rural Hungary and Poland

projekt:polska®


**21**  
Research Center

The project is supported by the  
Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

Central Europe and the Baltic States



Written by:  
Livia Kósa  
Aliz Keszthelyi  
Dr. Krzysztof Mączka  
Dr. Maciej Milewicz  
Flóra Hevesi  
Boglárka Dominik

Cover:  
Dorottya Lovász

Layout and graphic design:  
Dorottya Lovász

Illustrations:  
freepik/stories

# Table of Contents

Abstract	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Methodology	10
2.1. Sample	10
2.2. Data collection	11
3. Poland: Analysis of focus groups	14
3.1. Democratic decision making on a local level	14
3.2. Economic status and fears	20
3.3. Evaluation of the governing party and opinion about the regime change	23
3.4. Polarization	29
4. Hungary: Analysis of focus groups	33
4.1. Democratic decision making on a local level	33
4.2. Economic status and fears	36
4.3. Evaluation of the governing party and opinion about the regime change	41
4.4. Polarization	47
5. Summary and comparison	53
5. 1. Decision-making on the local level	53
5. 2. Economic status and fears	54
5. 3. Evaluation of the governing party and opinion about the regime change	56
5. 4. Polarization	58
6. Conclusion	61
Bibliography	64

# Abstract

Both the Hungarian and Polish population experienced significant political and social polarisation during the course of the last decade, which can be traced back to the populist rhetoric of the countries' political leadership. The divisive narrative created an increasing gap between the supporters of the government party and the opposition.

Previous research has demonstrated that the popularity of Fidesz-KD-NP in Hungary and PiS (Law and Justice) in Poland are disproportionately higher in smaller cities and villages, which are associated with lower socio-economic status. The collaborative research of 21 Research Center and Projekt: Polska focused on the political preference formation of people living in the villages of the aforementioned countries with the aim to understand the populist governing parties' popularity among them.

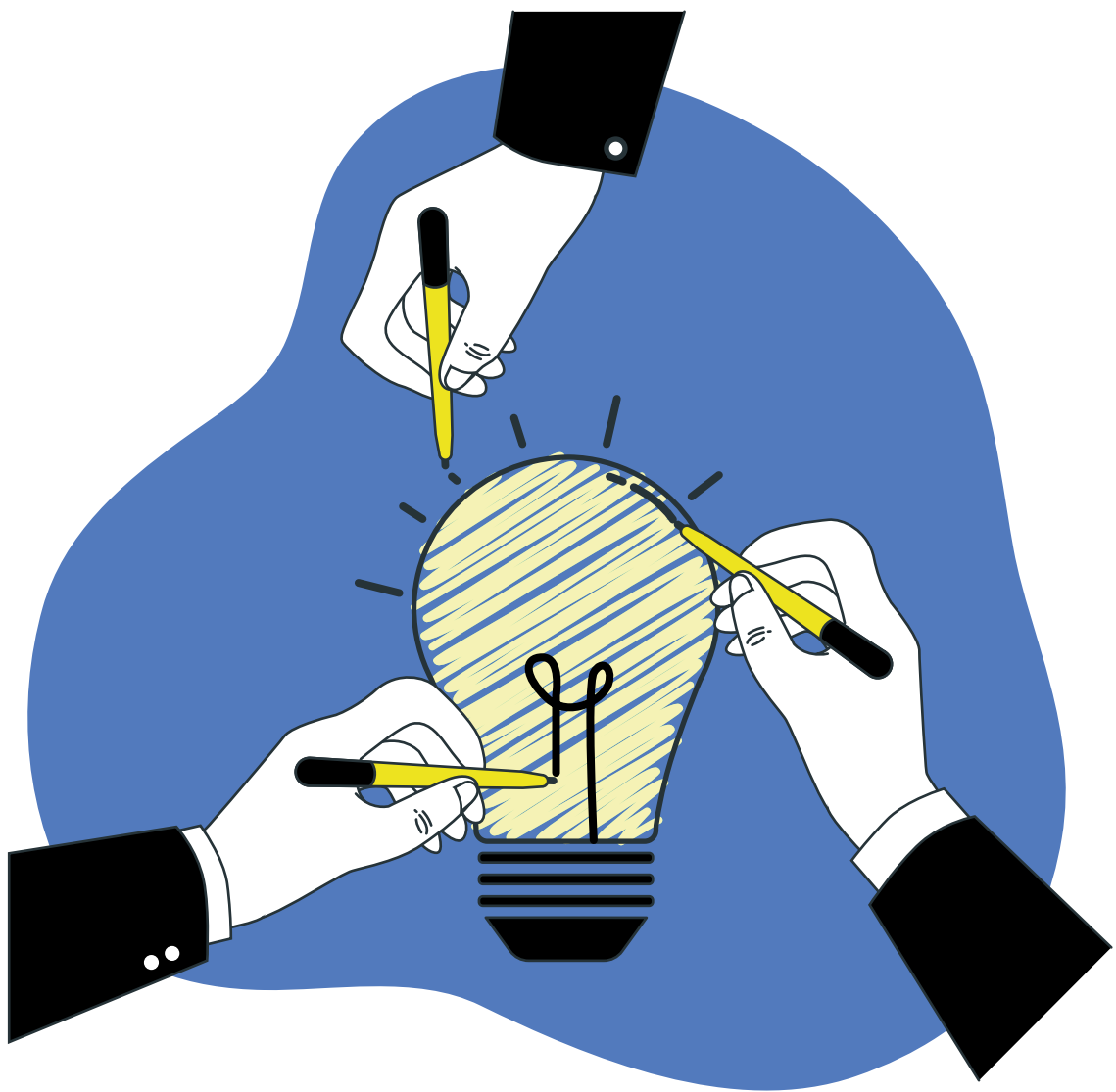
In order to deconstruct this pattern, the authors conducted four online focus groups in March 2021, investigating focus group participants' political socialization, local democratic processes, the communities' opinion-based homogeneity and discourse between the two political camps. The report presents findings from both countries and a comparative analysis to highlight the shared and differing elements of the two cases.

The project is supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom is not responsible for the content of this publication, or for any use that may be made of it. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) of the publication alone. These views do not necessarily reflect those of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

Central Europe and the Baltic States



# 1. Introduction

Once front-runners of democracy in the CEE region, Hungary and Poland today lead the way in democratic backsliding (Cinatetti et al, 2018). The two countries are famous for their centuries-old friendship to which a common saying refers to: “Hungarians and Poles are two brothers; they fight together and they drink together”. While their governing parties and populist leaders are careful to strengthen their friendship, the divisive rhetoric of Fidesz-KDNP and PiS managed to excavate the gap among their own people, tearing apart friends and families within their daily discussions of politics. Political polarisation is a prevalent issue in both countries, impacting their democratic processes and its people.

It solidifies rigid political group identities in which the opposition is rejected entirely, creating two “hegemonic camps” from the political spectrum (Palonen, 2009). Findings of this study suggest that this notion is definitive to understand political preferences and voting patterns of people in Poland and Hungary. ‘Minding the gap’ between the two sides invites us to think about it as a carefully constructed phenomenon by the governing parties, rather than a naturally occurring divide. Moreover, it bears significance for answering the success of Fidesz-KDNP in Hungary and PiS in Poland. Especially among communities such as small, rural ones, most exposed to the official narrative streamed via the monopolized national media.

## 1. Introduction

A previous study of the 21 Research Center (Róna et al, 2020) revealed that people living in villages and smaller cities in Hungary disproportionately favour the populist governing party compared to people living in larger cities. Fidesz-KDNP, the governing party coalition, is outstandingly popular among people with low socio-economic status. Whilst the study focused on economic voting, the subject has been examined from a variety of angles. Highlighting factors behind the party's success from its campaign against immigration (Bíró-Nagy, 2018), to their control over resources (Tóth-Szabó, 2018) or their divisive populist rhetoric (Hegedüs, 2019). One can see a similar pattern in Poland regarding Law and Justice (PiS) being favoured by people from small rural communities with lower educational qualifications. Researches similarly to Hungary emphasize PiS's populist rhetoric and anti-constitutionalism (Sadurski, 2018), authoritarian clientelism (Markowski, 2019) as well as popular welfare policies among others.

The aim of this study was to uncover why the governing parties are so popular among people living in villages by learning more about their political preference formation. While the question cannot be reduced to a single answer, our research proposes to explore its complexities through the analysis of four focus groups conducted online in March 2021, in Hungary and Poland. Focus group interviews were designed to capture the greater picture, exploring topics as participants' political socialization, participation in local democratic processes, and the opinion-based homogeneity in their communities. Group members' economic perceptions on a local and national level were also investigated and their opinion of the ruling parties and their opposition.

These interviews offered a possibility to learn about the wide-range of alternative explanations behind the success of Fidesz-KDNP and Law and Justice by gaining anecdotal evidence. This report follows a structure of first representing results from Poland, then – along the same topics – findings from Hungary and finally a comparison of the two. The second is a methodological section, presenting details on the sampling and data collection of the research. Afterwards, the topics of decision making on a local level, economic status and fears, opinion about the regime change and polarization are addressed, similarly to the order of questions in focus groups. The fifth chapter provides a summary and comparison of the data from the two countries, followed by a concluding chapter summarizing the discussion.

This report is an outcome of a collaboration between 21 Research Center and Projekt: Polska made possible with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. Besides its aim to learn why the populist rhetoric of the governing parties is so successful, its findings aspire to help various liberal organizations improve their public outreach in the countryside across Central and Eastern Europe.

Populist rhetoric aims to convince people that only the governing parties can represent the will of the people, and opposition parties (mainly liberals) are the agents of the elite. The examination of this theorized effect of populist messages and discovering the main mechanisms behind these is crucial to help liberals improve their communication strategy and policy making. To achieve this, the study will provide an overview of the perceived problems of rural people that liberal organizations could address. Although our inquiry was made in Hungary and Poland, it is hoped to better understand the analysed phenomena in the whole region.





## 2. Methodology

In 2021, the 21 Research Center in Hungary and Projekt:Polska in Poland conducted four focus groups to investigate the political preference formation of people living in small rural communities. The focus group interviews took place in March 2021. Altogether, the sample consisted of 25 participants (13 in Hungary, 12 in Poland). Each group session lasted about two hours, participation in the focus groups was voluntary and according to current ethical standards. Participants were offered a small incentive (voucher) to increase participation rates.

### 2.1. Sample

A set of selection criteria was chosen to define the target population of this study. Participants were selected based on age (between 40–65), educational qualifications (none higher than secondary school diploma) and political preferences. In both countries, one focus group entailed government supporters, while the other voters of the opposition. Also, the type of municipality group members reside in was an essential criterion for participation. The sample consisted of those living in small towns or villages. In Hungary, below the population of 2000 and at least 20 km away from the nearest city (with population at least 25 000). For the Polish groups, participants were from municipalities with a population between 1000–20 000 and according to the same distance criterion.

In the case of Hungary, an additional measure was that participants were only recruited from municipalities in which the proportion of Fidesz's voters at the previous general elections was above 65 percent. In the case of Poland, participants were recruited from municipalities in which the proportion of Law and Justice voters at the previous general elections (2019) was around 50 percent (ranging from 30 to 76 percent).

The first Hungarian focus group included 7 supporters of the opposition and the second 6 pro-government (Fidesz) members. In Poland, the first group included 6 supporters of the governing party (Law and Justice) and 6 voters of the opposition. For each group, originally 8 participants were recruited, but technical difficulties and last-minute drop-outs resulted in these final numbers. Each group was homogenous in terms of the established selection criteria. Nonetheless, these groups were not representative of the Polish and Hungarian rural population, partly due to the sample's small size, but primarily by nature of this form of qualitative data collection.

## 2.2. Data collection

This study used focus group interviews for the method of data collection. The method was found fitting because of its ability to reveal a wide-range of participants' associations, emotions and motivations. Furthermore, it is proved to be important for the analysis of sub-groups' shared values as a basis for justifying political change (Stanley, 2016). Whilst it does not offer representative results, it produces rich data that help understanding this complex topic.

As a result of the Covid restrictions, the focus groups were held online. This form proved to have some advantages, such as that there was no need for transportation, hence expanding the reach of this study to participants who otherwise would have been restricted or discouraged by the distance to take part. Additionally, joining the conversation from their home-setting might have eased the reluctance to answer political questions, often observed in research. On the other hand, there might have been more distractions as participants were at home, where technical issues and internet problems can easily arise. Also, the dynamics are different online than in in-person groups and it was more difficult for researchers to observe body language.

	Hungary		Poland	
	pro-government group	opposition-supporter group	pro-government group	opposition-supporter group
number of participants	6	7	6	6
gender	4 males, 2 females	3 males, 4 females	4 males, 2 females	4 males, 2 females
age	40-60 years old	40-60 years old	40-60 years old	40-60 years old
education level	secondary	secondary	primary-secondary	secondary

For data analysis, the focus groups were recorded online with the permission of participants and the footage deleted upon transcribing the interviews. The anonymity of participants is protected in this report. The structure of analysis followed the interview guide of the focus groups. Central threads within these conversations were designed to explore group members' views on four main subjects. First, participation in their local democratic processes, their opinion about their municipality and understanding of progress. Secondly, participants' perceived economic status and anxieties over what could threaten that relative position. Followed by the evaluation of their respective governing parties (Fidesz and PiS), their opposition and the prospect of a regime change. Lastly, in the fourth section political polarization was assessed, by asking participants about their experiences with people having political views different from their own.



# 3. Poland: Analysis of focus groups

## 3.1. Democratic decision making on a local level

The evaluation of changes in the local community from the opposition supporters' point of view varies greatly. It does not allow for general conclusions to be drawn. It seems that it is linked to developmental differences of particular localities, the personal attitude of research participants (more or less critical towards the surroundings) and their knowledge of what the local authorities are responsible for. In the light of the respondents' statements, this awareness is relatively low, and their insights are superficial.

”

*For the last 10 years, there has been stagnation. One factory was established, and that's all, there are markets and some companies in the neighboring city, but these are not the jobs (markets) we would need. The infrastructure is weak, e.g., gas, internet (it has improved since the pandemic). (Słupca, 40y)*

Conversely, another respondent noted:

”

*I certainly feel much better now than I did 10 years ago. I'm not a very 'mobile' person, and now I have easier transport via buses. Two of my daughters lost their jobs because of the pandemic, and now the construction of two markets has been completed, so those new jobs are being created. I am optimistic about the future. (Nysa, 46y)*

### 3. Poland: Analysis of focus groups

The assessment of life in one's locality is influenced mainly by the personal material situation and the possibility of finding a well-paying and interesting job. Changes are noticed, but they are not revolutionary but evolutionary.

Municipality authorities are positively assessed for their effectiveness in implementing the most needed investments and the possibility of direct contact or exerting pressure when needed. Municipality authorities are not perceived as 'government representatives in the field', issues related to their political affiliations rarely come up during the discussion about them. Instead, they are visions of more or less effective host managers whom the community has hired to carry out specific tasks. Within the discussions of their characters, there is no room for the political disputes that signalize national politics.

”

*It is ok in my municipality. A lot has changed for the better. The infrastructure and culture have improved a lot, so has the cultural center, etc. The problem is with work. I have never worked in my hometown. I have always traveled at least 30 kilometers. The mayor is ok. When the residents complained about the commute to work, he even organized a bus and resolved these problems. (Borek Wielkopolski, 41y)*

What constitutes a fundamental limitation of agency being attributed to local authorities, is the lack of sufficient financial resources to implement more ambitious investment plans.

”

*The municipality does not have enough money to invest because the education sector absorbs a lot. Therefore, the municipality cannot contribute to investments which the Starost's office can make. If the municipality does not contribute, the Starost's office itself will not do it. (Stupca, 40y)*

The situation at the local level is perceived rather positively by government supporters. However, the respondents showed low awareness of the changes within their communities. The main changes in infrastructure are appreciated through the prism of the effectiveness, determining how local authorities are evaluated. Respondents' assessment of local councils was thus dependent on their success to implement infrastructural improvements. This concerns such investments as roads, new sidewalks, or sewerage, the lack of which is still a problem in many small localities. The labor market and the possibility of finding a job are assessed well due to low unemployment. As one government electorate noted:

”

*In our area, there have been big changes in the last 10 years, including the sewerage and the water supply. There is progress if there is money in the municipality and they do the job right. A thoroughfare is being built, the municipality is making efforts and this is very good. We still need to add sewage systems in smaller places in the municipality, but it used to be worse. There's no reason to complain. Now my life is much easier, the labor market has improved and there are no problems with work. In the past, it was scary to look at it [the area]. There was no work. There was nothing. It was just a mess. (Pruchnik, 60y)*

Disparities between individuals' access to life chances do not go unnoticed. According to the respondents, it is easier for young people to get rich than for older people, who have to live on very low pensions and cannot improve their living conditions too much.

”

*Many lonely widows, with pensions of about 1000 zlotys [around 225 Euros], have a hard life. Younger people are wealthier, and also if you are active, you can manage. (Sierakowice, 42y)*



### 3. Poland: Analysis of focus groups

Finally, prospects for the development of agriculture are assessed pessimistically, as it is no longer possible to maintain an adequate standard of living without combining work on the land with other professional activities.

”

*There are a lot of jobs in agriculture, which are not enough to make a living, and people have to combine them with additional work. People also decide to sell their livestock. We have rather poor land in my region, and fertilizers and so on cost a lot. (Chmielno, 47y)*

Local authorities are evaluated rather separately from political conflicts at a central level. It seems that being a ‘good host’ is independent of party colors.

**There is  
no problem with our mayor if there  
is a need to contact him you can always reach  
him. I have no business with him, I have nothing to  
do with him, and maybe that’s why it’s strange, but I  
have no complaints. He does his job, a common  
man, the way he should be. (Pruchnik, 60y)**

The responsibility for unsolved local problems is delegated to those who govern the country. For example, the issue of economic migration according to the respondents was the responsibility of Donald Tusk’s government.

”

*The job market has improved. It's good that they raised the minimum wage because in a private company like the ones here, they wouldn't raise it by themselves for sure. This only changed when Law and Justice came to power, because when Tusk ruled, he only took care of himself and offered people to go abroad. (Koźmin Wielkopolski, 59y)*

Critical opinions may include those who perceive the mayors as people looking after their own interests and neglecting the whole community's needs. This mainly refers to such a distribution of goods (investments) located near officials responsible for the municipality. At the same time, the rest of it is neglected. As one participant noted:

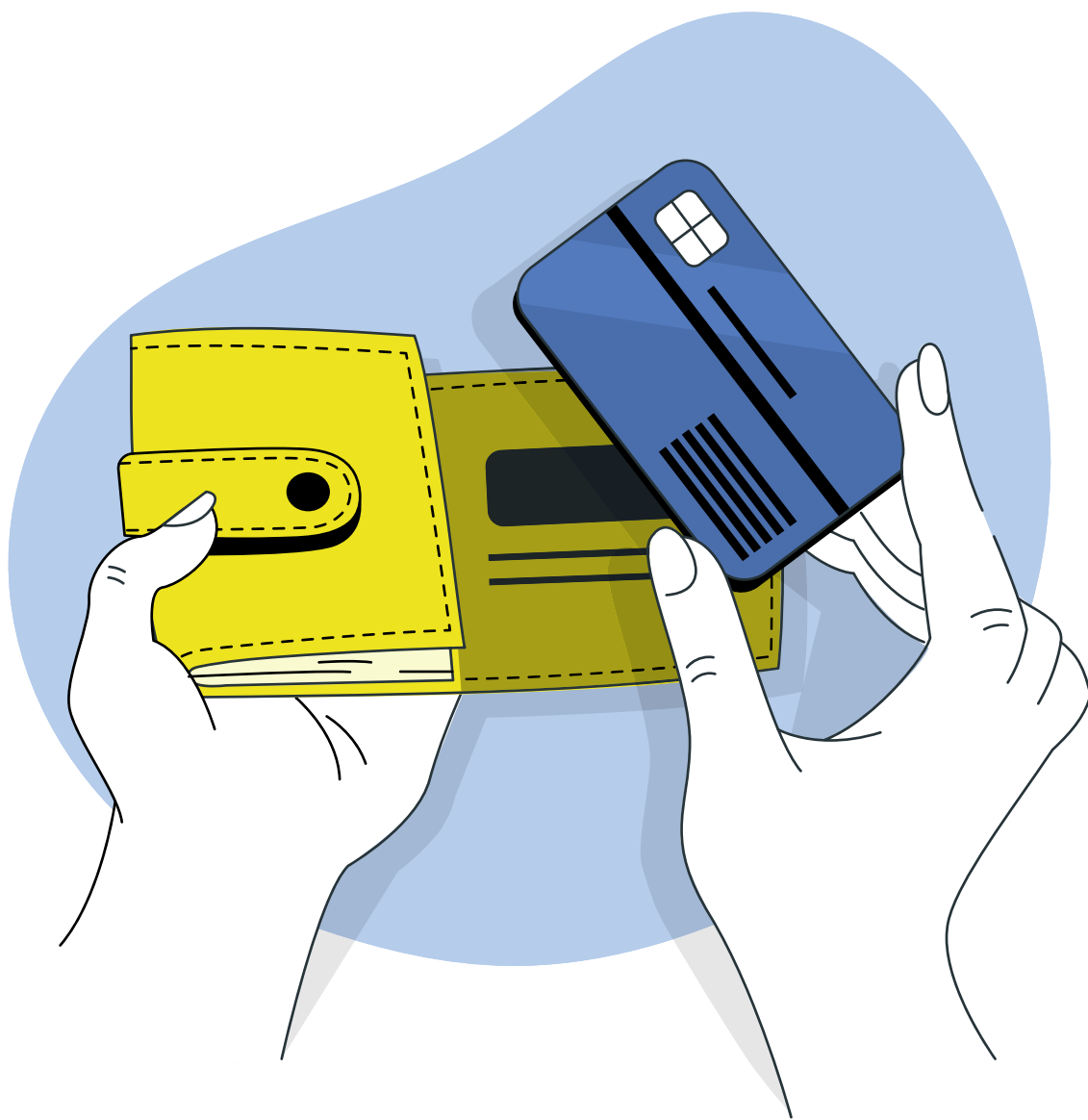
”

*The village leader (also) only sweeps around his own front door, taking care of his own welfare and not the whole village. (Koźmin Wielkopolski, 59y)*

At the same time, a sense of the relative closeness of local authorities in their relations with citizens prevails. The respondents are aware that they have close access to the authorities if they want to contact them and express their demands. However, they rarely use this formula, which reveals the low level of social involvement and engagement at the local level. The latter can only be seen in local conflicts, such as those related to school closures, which have to be resolved by the local administration.

”

*The only problems are financial, but they [local authorities] give as much as they can. It is clean and transparent. They used to protest against closing schools, and the mayor understood people's concerns, schools were not closed. (Pruchnik, 60y)*



## 3.2. Economic status and fears

Describing their economic expectations, the opposition's supporters were more strongly concerned about the prospect of long term (longue duree) economic effects of today's political decisions. There is a fear that the obligations taken on by those in power will result in such indebtedness of the country that it will be increasingly difficult for the next generations.

Nonetheless, many respondents perceived that they now have an easier life and their children a better start than other people who entered adulthood 10 years ago. They also signalled fears regarding inflation, expected increases in unemployment, the coming economic crisis (related to the pandemic), and having to work longer in the future because of very low or no pensions.

”

*The problem is inflation. I am also afraid that we will be working longer and longer, I think to 70. I have my own business, and this pandemic is a tough challenge. The beginning of this year was bad. People have started saving. This second year of the pandemic is worse than last year. In the 15 years I have been running my own business. There hasn't been such a bad year. I am afraid I will have to change jobs or close my business. People are happy with social programs, but those who are around 50 and have raised children are already unhappy. This also divides society. 500 [zlotys] plus certainly makes it easier. I can afford some leisure activities for the kids. (Stupca, 40y)*

In addition to economic concerns, environmental concerns related to climate change, exhaustion of natural resources, water depletion, declining air quality and environmental pollution also appear in respondents' statements.

”

*As far as my fears are concerned, I am afraid that I will not go to the lakes anymore because of the pollution. I see that the quality of the environment is getting worse and worse. Unfortunately, there are many villages in our municipality, and many people burn garbage in their stoves, so the air will not be clean. (Pobiedziska, 46y)*

In terms of economic status, the greatest concerns of government supporters are related to the amount of pensions, which may not be enough to survive. In their context, they lack opportunities to improve one's financial situation (rising cost of living versus pensions being a fixed amount). All this means that despite the rule of Law and Justice, the future is welcomed with anxiety rather than hope.

”

*I'm worried about how low our pensions will be. With large fees, these miserable pensions will be difficult. As for the present, those who try, will earn money, those who learn, will earn later. (Sierakowice, 42y)*

Secondly, social changes occurring in Europe also cause fear, as these are not accepted by the pro-government group. These include concerns over the disappearance of moral values, the questioning of capitalism, and a fear for weakened security – in the context of the disappearance of traditional values, especially in the upbringing of the youth. The influence of technology (phones, computers) on the formation of social ties was assessed negatively, one that deepens the sense of isolation and exclusion of the elderly.

”

*I see the future as being bleak when I look at what is happening in my country, Europe, and the world. The disappearance of moral values, in general, everything, capitalism came, and it seemed to be good, but now it has gone so that nothing except money counts. There is work, but money is not the proof of how you live and what you get out of it. I'll ma-*

*nage because in five years I'll be retired. I don't know if I'll live much longer, but beyond that, I don't see things in a good light. There's no respect for-, or honor in bringing up this new generation (referring to 25 years olds). I don't feel threatened. I just say what the future will be. This technology, too, there is no human contact, only computers, and phones. And our youth looks not to their parents, but Europe. And the other things (economy etc.), the longer the pandemic lasts, the worse they will be. (Pruchnik, 60y)*

Once again, the generational conflict between young and old is revealed. The former are seen as lazy, entitled, and selfish.

**Now this  
new generation, everyone wants to have  
money and not make money.  
(Pruchnik, 59y)**

Finally, the pessimistic view of the world is further burdened with fears of future pandemics and their hard-to-predict socio-economic consequences.

### 3.3. Evaluation of the governing party and opinion about the regime change

Opposition voters' opinions of politics and politicians are decidedly negative. Participation in elections is treated as a duty rather than a right. Although they are associated with hope for change, they are usually followed by unpleasant disappointment.

”

*Generally, I do not think well of the political class. It makes me angry right away. I always cut off political topics. (Pietrowice Wielkie, 57y)*

Politicians are treated as people who often change their minds, go to power only to „set themselves up financially”, and do not care about the needs of voters. According to the respondents, politics changes people for the worse because it makes them more greedy and selfish. Even though the image of an expert politician in a given field is still desired, the respondents do not feel that such people are elected in elections. Partially they blame the way the electoral lists are constructed, which favors those who have connections at the expense of those who are elected based on their merits. The opposition's voters also blame themselves for bad political choices, which effectively discourages them from politics.

”

*Politician – greed. Unfortunately, Politicians get into power mainly through their connections. Politicians should take care of the people, but this is not happening. The blame is only little on our side because they promise, we vote, and then nothing happens. (Nysa, 47y)*

Strong emotions and even aggression characterize the respondents' opinions about Law and Justice. In their opinion, they perceive the ruling party mainly as a hyena that attacks in packs, seizes everything it can, and distributes it among itself or as a pig that does everything to get closer to the trough. Respondents are aware that previous governments were not good for them either, but the scale of perceived corruption obscures the image of governments preceding the victory of Law and Justice.

”

*Hyena, the hyena, is an African animal that can even attack a lion in a group. It is not my party, and it does not govern well, in my opinion. People can be grateful for 500 [zlotys] plus because it helps and drives the economy, because they circulate, for patriotism, national pride. (Pajęczno, 52y)*

The opposition's voters have an ambivalent attitude toward social transfers (e.g., 500+ which is a social benefit for families with children in the amount of PLN 500 per child). On the one hand, they see it as something they can be grateful for to the ruling party. On the other hand, they regard it as an unacceptable form of electoral bribery (like the 13th and 14th pensions, which are supplementary pensions payable to all pensioners) and a tool that discourages people from working and makes them dependent on the whims of those in power. Some believe that Law and Justice is silencing its voters with financial benefits, because they enjoyed what they got and did not look critically at what the government was doing. Comparisons are made to communism based on political nepotism being affiliated with one party.



”

*I don't like the Law and Justice for their indecisiveness and how they constantly change their minds, once over finally winning against the pandemic or then because it's getting worse. I'm grateful to them for the 13th and 14th pensions. I'm not a pensioner yet, but it's good. I contributed a few pennies to the seniors, for shopping, for medicines, because it is a shame that elderly people have to live like this. Despite the benefits of the 500+, I would prefer to support families, where at least one person works. There are a few pathological families in our municipality with many children, but in which the father drinks, the mother smokes cigarettes and uses plenty of cosmetics. This is not how it is supposed to be. (Pobiedziska, 46y)*

”

*I have no idea what makes people vote for Law and Justice. I associate these times with communism. Corruption, connections. I'm not saying that the previous government was good. But I don't like what we have now. I don't get anything, but I pay more and more taxes, and this 500 plus to increase the fertility rate in our region, there is no chance, unless in dysfunctional families. (Pietrowice Wielkie, 57y)*

Most of the statements are dominated by helplessness and a lack of ideas on how the opposition can respond to these threats. The link between those in power and the Catholic Church is criticized.

Voters of Law and Justice evaluate the entire political sphere negatively, treating it as largely disconnected from the needs of citizens. Participation in elections is, in their opinion, an unpleasant obligation that must be fulfilled. They also feel that they do not always make the right choices because they do not know the people they want to vote for. However, they do not blame themselves for these decisions, but those elected by them or the 'system' that favors such people in political positions.

**Elections – you have to vote. I would like to know some of these people so that they are smart people with ideas and not just in power for the sake of positioning themselves [better].  
(Sierakowice, 42y)**

Although they believe that politicians should have appropriate qualifications (they should be experts in their field) to hold their mandates or public functions in the state, Voters of Law and Justice are devoid of any illusions that such people are the ones who ultimately end up in parliament. This leads to a situation that can be described as being the result of a number of individual electoral decisions perceived by the Law and Justice voters as rational, and guided by concern for the good of the state. Hence allowing political representation by those who do not meet the standards and expectations expressed by their voters.

”

*Politicians need qualifications, but it depends on what they do. If they deal with a certain area, it is better that they have some ideas about it. Still, there are also important ones who may not have too many qualifications, but they are smart and watch what is happening. (Koźmin Wielkopolski, 59y)*

Respondents also believe that politics can change people for the worse and embroil them in various scandals or affairs.

The dominant way of evaluating the ruling party by its voters is the notion that although all politicians steal, „these ones at least share” with people. We are talking about social transfers, which since 2016 have

been directed with a wide stream to Poles and specifically selected social groups (senior citizens, families with many children, residents of small towns). In this regard, they express their gratitude towards Law and Justice.

”

*People support those in power because they give, their predecessors did not give, and families were more modest. If they took it away, they would probably stop voting for them. (Chmielno, 47y)*

The motivations behind voting for Law and Justice can also be described as being ‘put against the wall’. Although they accept certain imperfections of their political formation, they lack an alternative towards which they could communicate their preferences. This sense of political isolation is reinforced by a particular narrative justifying their political choices, according to which their predecessors stole more, participated more in scandals, and acted more to the detriment of ordinary people. Law and Justice voters are also cemented in their views by a sense of being in a besieged fortress. Even though Law and Justice has full power, they are convinced that the opposition is responsible for any failures of their party. This belief is strengthened by the propaganda of the governmental media, which was oftentimes quoted by respondents to support their arguments. The supporters of the Law and Justice party live under constant pressure from various forces, which are only waiting to spoil the ideal picture of those in power.

”

*But there is no better party at the moment because every party looks the other way, they deal with gays, etc., and let everyone live their own life, but there are more important things. Besides, for what reason should two men adopt children? The child will be disadvantaged because it will not know where the mother and the father are. (Koźmin Wielkopolski, 59y)*

Political community and bond with the party is built in the feeling that they are made of the same clay. Law and Justice voters know that Law and Justice politicians represent their world and their worldview. They come from similar backgrounds. They speak a similar language. That is why the choice of Law and Justice is a chance for them to restore their dignity, which was disrespected and ridiculed by the opposition's elites.

When asked about which animal they would compare their party to, some avoided answering the question, treating it as insulting; "How could you compare humans to animals?". Others point out that they associate Law and Justice with an overprotective mother hen who takes her chicks under her wing.

”

*Law and Justice as an animal would be a breeding hen. It is protective of the weak but sometimes overprotective and addictive, and that is not good. (Koźmin Wielkopolski, 59y)*

Such a vision of the world in which Law and Justice exercises full power and takes care of 'its own' is an important element constituting the party's relations with its right-wing electorate.

”

*I will not compare a party to an animal. A party is a party, and an animal is an animal. Law and Justice is caring for the people. They have respect for the elderly, every party makes mistakes but other parties nowadays just make it harder for Law and Justice. Thanks to Law and Justice, I can retire earlier because I can't imagine myself in such a job for a few more years, and PO [Civic Platform, main opposition party] would like people to work until death. (Koźmin Wielkopolski, 59y)*

## 3.4. Polarization

Opposition supporters feel that political topics generate heated and often unpleasant discussions. What hurts them the most is that politics has divided even families. They also have no idea how to overcome these disputes in the future because a situation in which people stop talking to each other completely is unacceptable for them in the long run. There is little hope expressed that if Poles could unite around common, important goals in the past, maybe it will finally happen the same way.

”

*In my close family, this is a dividing topic because of politicians' behaviour. They also argue and are disrespectful towards each other, which affects their voters. The media is biased and can't keep itself to common sense. They don't present the issue [in its complexity] but clearly go for one side. I rather avoid television. We can unite and get along because history shows that we can. (Borek Wielkopolski, 41y)*

The only strategy is to avoid conflict and avoid triggering subjects when discussing with family or friends.

”

*We avoided political topics once there was a situation where two sons-in-law would beat-up each other. Since then, we have avoided such topics. Some people do not want to accept other arguments. It seems to me that now this dispute is harsher. For example, during the women's strike, those situations near the cathedral in Poznań, nationalists, and other unpleasant situations. (Pobiedziska, 46y)*

Opposition voters point out that „the example comes from the top” – politicians arguing on TV programs are responsible for conflicts in families and among friends. Accusations are also directed at the media, which is considered biased and blamed for creating an atmosphere of division and disputes. However, it should be noted that how discussions proceed is a very individual matter, depending on the personal culture of the disputants.

Concerning government supporters, the analysis of opinions about everyday political discussions among Poles reveals deep divisions between urban and rural areas. Quarrels, often very intense, are a typical description of the situation Law and Justice voters find themselves in, when discussing political issues with people holding different views.

”

*In my family, these topics are avoided, although sometimes they are discussed. There is some friction because the family from the city favors others, and the one from the countryside favors others. I think this argument has existed all the time. I think it is impossible to convince the other side. The town and the village think differently. They have different benefits and do not know their prospects. (Chmielno, 47y)*

The prevailing belief is that there is no way to convince the other side of the argument. Hence, it is simply better to avoid political issues overall. These divisions turn out to be difficult or even impossible to overcome. Different value systems and different material needs of each group are emphasized.

### 3. Poland: Analysis of focus groups

They were teasing each other in the workplace during election time. How can you vote for these or that? That you are stupid because you voted for Law and Justice. Who cares who I vote for? Everyone has their own vote and should vote as they see fit, according to their conscience. I didn't say who I voted for at work. One's vote is a secret, and nobody has anything to do with it. But there used to be a little more respect. Now there's a lot of envy and not as much kindness. In my family, I also hate talking about politics. Politics is enough on the radio and TV.  
(Koźmin Wielkopolski, 59y)

An analysis of the discussion among the Law and Justice electorate reveals three more issues. Firstly, they point out that the example comes from the top, i.e., politicians are responsible for conflicts within families. They also cannot get along with each other when participating in television programs. Thus, political aggression often translates into aggression between family members and friends. Secondly, Law and Justice voters have the feeling that the 'other side' of the dispute does not respect their views and choices, and its tolerance in this regard is just for show.

Thirdly, which follows from the previous one, the right-wing electorate expects acceptance for their own way of evaluating reality and their political preferences related to it.





# 4. Hungary: Analysis of focus groups

## 4.1. Democratic decision making on a local level

The presence of democracy on the local level contributes to the strengthening of nation-level democracy as well. People who meet with democratic processes and values, such as deliberation, accountability, and responsibility of local leaders will value and demand democratic functioning on the country-level as well. That is why it is important to observe whether people have a say in public affairs in the smallest communities. The following chapter will introduce participants' accounts of their community and the modes of involvement in democratic processes on a local level, before broadening our scope to their perceived economic status in society.

Focus group participants supporting the opposition were asked to talk about their village and its development during the last decade. The most common problems were poor access to larger cities and concerns regarding their village turning into a commuter town due to the lack of local employment opportunities. They mentioned that the villages won several tenders in the last few years but they mainly attributed the financial support to the mayors' connections to Fidesz. It was a recurring motive that the residents do not partake of the benefits equally.

”

*There are a few renovated houses, which belong to “somebody” who has close ties to the mayor or the municipality. The development does not intend to favor the common people. (Szedres, 46y)*

Similarly, another respondent noted:

”

*The village only develops in case it serves someone's interests. However, it is not the interest of the common people that try to make a living and prosper in the village. (Fácánkert, 44y)*

The familiar sentiment regarding local decision-making processes suggested that the mayors tend to use a rather paternalistic way of conduct. Even though in theory there are some platforms to aggregate public opinion (e.g. office hours), residents do not utilize these options. Local mayors tend to use one-way communication: people feel that they are informed about the most important news through their social media site or on the website of the village, but the mayor does not pay any regard to their opinion.

”

*Our mayor places themselves above our community, but it's not because they are riding the high horse. They make sure to take care of everything according to their judgment, they know what has to be done, we must not worry ourselves. They are above us and they arrange everything so that it doesn't concern us. (Vértesacska, 52y)*

More respondents expressed a shared perception that not only are they generally excluded from the local decision-making channels, but they also lack the opportunity to appeal to the mayor or the municipality with particular concerns. One of them noted that the local authority would formally appreciate the proactivity, but they would certainly brush off any initiative coming from the residents. The supporters of the governing party had fairly different perceptions regarding their villages' development in the last decade. The common sentiment of the respondents was that their village went through unignorable progress: the renovation and modernization of the local infrastructure such as roads, educational institutions, health care. The reported elements are primarily material.

#### 4. Hungary: Analysis of focus groups

Only a few problems have been noted, such as the lack of gathering spaces. They attribute these developments directly to the change of political regime (referring to 2010 as a turning point – when Fidesz won the elections). When they were asked who might be responsible for the success of winning tenders and EU funding, they emphasized the role of the mayor and the parliamentary representative, saying “a lot depends on the mayor.”

Simultaneously, the narrative of self-made success – which also refers to personal and community level – was also dominant:

”

*Every man is the architect of his own fortune. You must not rely on your government or municipality exclusively, it's the responsibility of the community to make things happen.  
(Medina-Szőlőhegy, 50y)*

It was a recurring element throughout the whole focus group discussion of the governing party's supporters that they hold dedication and hard work of primary value – however, they tend to identify the perceived achievements of Fidesz with their own personal success. They tend to refer to the government's accomplishments as something “we attained”, which suggests that the governing party successfully achieved being identified with the Hungarian nation and the Hungarian people. One of the few experiences shared by the supporters of the government party and the opposition was that both groups perceived that they are not included in the local decision-making processes. However, while the opposition supporters described it as paternalistic and exclusive, Fidesz supporters found it to be justifiable and the right way of conduct. The common sentiment expressed by the group was that the mayor is perfectly competent to make the decisions without gathering the public opinion, since they are one of the local residents, they are familiar with the community and its needs. According to this group, there are notably more available platforms – e.g. public hearings – for the local people to articulate their concerns than it was perceived by the opposition supporters.

## 4.2. Economic status and fears

The political views of people usually relate to their economic status, that is why it is important to observe how people live and how they perceive their living conditions. As a result of the focus group interviews, we see great differences between the opposition and the pro-government groups regarding economic status and social fears in the rural area.

The 21 Research Center analysed the economic voting in Hungary in one of its previous studies (Róna et al. 2020). The aim of the study was to assess the role of economic motivations as the driver of electoral support for the governing party of Hungary. The analysis was based on data before the COVID-19 crisis. The study revealed that the upper-most decile of Hungarian society is rather oppositionist, while support for the governing Fidesz party is the most prominent amongst the most vulnerable and materially-deprived strata of society. Paradoxically, this is a result of economic voting. About 70% of respondents from the „underclass” were not unsatisfied with the dynamics of their own financial situation. It was also found that even among that 30% of poor voters who experience economic deterioration, half of them still would vote for the government, the parties of the opposition are not able to garner this class. This correlation is surprising because it is only valid in the case of voters who reside in the countryside, and because amongst all other groups of pro-government voters there is no negative perception of the economy. The study confirmed the influence of the consumer confidence index on the support for the incumbent party, and this support, on average, follows shifts in the consumer confidence index with a one or two month delay. (Róna et al., 2020)

#### 4. Hungary: Analysis of focus groups

In our focus group research, according to the opposition group the main problem is that while wages have stagnated in the last few years, the cost of living (food, construction, petrol etc.) is increasing. As a female participant noted:

**Five years ago, when I had less income,  
it was still easier to live by and raise  
my two children than now.  
(Sárkeresztúr, 41y)**

By contrast the pro-government group members think people still have to work a lot but they can make a better living, there are better opportunities, so they can achieve more.

”

*My life did not change much, I work as much as I can, and now I can live a better life. (Szedres, 59y)*

Some of them also mentioned that they rather do the work around the house like tiling themselves because the cost of it is high and unpredictable. Although there were also some group members whose opinion was that there is no significant difference, life remained just as difficult as it was 10 years ago, people still have to struggle for life.

Hence, from the discussion of this focus group, we can see that there are supporters of the opposition who blame the current government and Fidesz for their economic status and ones who reported no fallback in their financial situation but are not satisfied with the government in general. Presumably, they were also less satisfied with the previous governments than the others. The focus group also revealed that people are also concerned about their physical and mental health. One tangible example of this was the connection between wages and the affordability of healthier options in consumption as a man with a large family expressed:

”

*We used to live a healthier way, we could afford buying fruits and vegetables, now we have to think twice. (Sárkeresztúr, 41y)*

A participant noted that there is a remarkable shift in the public atmosphere: they feel that one must think twice before articulating a strong political opinion. Politics became a more common topic of everyday conversations than it used to be, but it is also very divisive. The only positive thing someone mentioned was the pro-family policy. On the other side, the members of the pro-government group were way more positive, they all agreed that from an economic perspective life is easier now than it used to be. As a member who is working as a family farmer noted:

”

*There was a mortifying government before, the farmers don't like the left-wing, they always cause trouble. (Sárszentágota, 45y)*

#### 4. Hungary: Analysis of focus groups

The main advantage they mentioned was the pro-family policy of Fidesz. This includes tax allowance or Hungary's family home ownership subsidy program (CSOK). With this program the aim of the government is to increase the national birth rate and stop the decline of Hungary's population. The program offers financial assistance for families, specifically toward home ownership, and it also includes reduction in the value-added tax rate on newly built homes. (About Hungary, 2016)

This pro-family policy also includes interest-free, all-purpose loan for women living in their first marriage, mortgage deductions for married couples after the birth of their second and third children, exemption from personal income tax for women who have given birth to at least four children, car purchase program, construction of nursery places and childcare allowance for grandparents. (fidesz-eu.hu, 2019)

Asking about their future prospects, both groups marked the parliamentary elections of 2022 as a potential turning point. Among the pro-government group the common belief was that "If the current government stays on, we will have a good life, but in the case of a change of government, it will be really bad." They were concerned that in case of the oppositions' victory, fields like the construction industry would suffer. They also identify the opposition as the 'previous regime' which almost bankrupted this country. Furthermore, it was also common fear that the new parliament would be incapable of acting, while the Fidesz government is able to bring through what they want thanks to their two-thirds majority. Regardless of the outcomes of the next general election, the opposition group was definitely worried about their future, and neither way was seen as bright. In their opinion, the current regime is not correct at all. They want a change of government, but they are also worried that potentially a new government would deal with putting its own people in good positions, and they would not pay attention to the 'ordinary people'. Beyond the parliamentary elections, they also mentioned the effects of the Covid-crisis. All in all, disillusionment with politics seemed to be very strong among oppositionists, and an opposition government was also seen only as a "less bad" option.





### 4.3. Evaluation of the governing party and opinion about the regime change

Whether looking at the supporters of the governing party or its opposition, analysing perceptions of Fidesz and participants' preferences regarding a regime change revealed complexities in their answers. Whilst opinion of the governing party's supporters echoed the message communicated by the Fidesz-ruled mass media, even supporters of the opposition recognised Fidesz as strong and Viktor Orbán a powerful leader. Interestingly, reasoning along ideological lines was absent from the accounts of supporters, who emphasised the material benefits (like family support packages, job opportunities) and economic advantages of a Fidesz government. On the other hand, when asked about 'what they think can be attractive about Fidesz for people' voters of the opposition primarily highlighted more ideologically-charged acts of the party, such as their handling of migration and the EU. In essence, the influence of the Hungarian mass media and participants' economic perceptions – discussed in the previous chapter – were prevalent in the evaluation of the governing party as well as in considerations of an alternative regime. The possibility of a regime change, thus an assessment of the opposition brought criticism from both sides – although to a different extent – including doubt in their ability to govern. However, even the group of Fidesz supporters who were certain of their party's strength and considered the opposition as a joke, expressed fear of Fidesz being defeated in the upcoming elections.

Although, there was no clear divide between beliefs, drivers of voting or socio-economic characteristics between the two groups' participants, they mutually resented hearing, let alone understanding the other half's opinions. As this phenomenon is explained in the following chapter, we will now turn to a detailed presentation of the focus groups' thoughts of Fidesz and the regime change.

As a point of departure participants were asked to describe the party of Fidesz according to what car brand they would associate with it and why. Supporters of the opposition pictured Fidesz as a tank, “trampling over everything” and one “with excessive fuel consumption”. Their associations primarily draw an aggressive and high spending (referring to corruption) character of the governing party, who’s on top of all inconsiderate to others. Conversely, the group of Fidesz supporters depicted Fidesz as a “decent, but not too extravagant” family car that is reliable and “always reaches its destination”. Their answers were telling as they revealed their attitudes towards an overall understanding of Fidesz, recognising that it is not perfect; “a good car, but it would need servicing”, “a few parts do not work properly, these would need a replacement”, yet choosing to disregard these for the bigger picture. Someone mentioned that “it could only fit the prime minister and the driver”, referring to the central role of Orbán, as someone that symbolises the whole party. The figure of Orbán also appeared as one of the main drivers named by the group of the opposition for someone to vote for Fidesz. As a male participant phrased:

**The way  
he is portrayed; as a powerful leader who’s  
keeping a tight grip on everything, is appealing to  
people. They feel that they are following someone who’s  
strong, determined, stands up for himself and for everyone.  
Simply because that is what the media communicates.  
I have never seen him vulnerable or weak.  
(Vértesacsza, 52y)**

#### 4. Hungary: Analysis of focus groups

Besides the idea of a charismatic leader, several participants of this group also appointed acts grounded in the Hungarian nationalist agenda of Fidesz that they found somewhat attractive about the governing party. Such as defending Hungarian interests and “not caving in to the EU” regarding their wish to ‘let in’ immigrants, both arguments advertised heavily through national media outlets. Someone also underlined that policies of Fidesz supporting families (CSOK, family tax credit, etc.) are in fact beneficial for the middle-class, who “would be a fool not to vote for them”, although those on the lowest wages are unable to access these aids. Another argument made was that Fidesz is popular among the elderly, because:

”

*They grew to hate the socialist era to an extent that for them, all that matters is the regime to be anything but that. Fidesz is its opposite, all that came after, whilst they label all other [parties] socialists. (Szedres, 46y)*

That was visible in participants’ answers was a shifting throughout the conversation between positions. They aimed to define “Them”, who like Fidesz and “Us”, who do not, by distancing themselves through external categorizations as ‘the elderly’, or ‘the middle-class’, who they associate as Fidesz voters. At the same time, they occasionally seemed to have slipped out of character when not appointing advantages of Fidesz to others, but themselves acknowledged the appeal of their certain policies. Reasoning of participants who are voters of Fidesz differed mainly in its emphasis on the desirability of economic opportunities their governance provides. The majority (4 out of 7) argued that the pro-family policies of the governing party are unique, that “there is no such opportunity even in Western Europe”. They brought examples of families they know personally and whose living situation changed drastically to an extent that “they struggled to make ends meet for years, but they have been watching football games in Barcelona for a year now”. Notably, two participants approached the question from their resentment towards the alternative, a governance by the opposition. One of them explained that they have no idea how to lead a country, but “Fidesz incepts the national awareness, has a vision of Hungary’s-, and Hungarian people’s future”.

A female participant concluded:

”

*They [Fidesz] have been in power for so long, I would not find peace if it wasn't them. My soul finds rest only this way. (Győrság, 43y)*

Participants described being attracted to Fidesz as an inevitability, one that is mainly supported by the economic advantage they provide, but also due to the opposition's unacceptability in their view. Hence, an understanding of the other camp of voters was rejected completely, referring to the opposition voters as 'brainwashed'. This concept appeared in both groups' discussion, mutually labelling each other. From the opposition group, we asked 'what they think could persuade someone to change their mind about voting for Fidesz'. Participants argued that corruption and "the centralised stealing of taxpayers' money," are the main reasons one should divert from Fidesz. They were very much informed about the current affairs and stories leading the oppositional news sites. Ones they mentioned revolved around the criticism of Fidesz's hypocrisy. Such as their politicians urging to stay at home during lockdown, while themselves travelling to Dubai, or amassing large sums of money through private businesses, while advocating for the representation of the 'common people'. Nevertheless, as someone brought up: "A true Fidesz voter cannot be deterred from their party by anything." When asked why they think that, the notion of being 'brainwashed' came up, claiming that no matter what atrocities happen to democratic standards faithful Fidesz voters will not notice it. For them, "the arrogance that penetrates Fidesz" is what annoys them most, not even pretending to hide their acts of stealing public money.

#### 4. Hungary: Analysis of focus groups

Meanwhile, the pro-government group claimed that while “there have been a few scandalous affairs, but these were exaggerated” and that the opposition is “boring” as they keep repeating themselves when demanding accountability. Someone referred to Ferenc Gyurcsány (former prime minister of Hungary), whose figure has been vilified during the Fidesz-era, as their reason for trust issues with the united opposition. Once questioning ‘why do they think some people vote for the opposition’ distinct groups were identified – similarly to the opposition’s account of Fidesz voters – ‘the elderly’ and ‘the younger generation’. The former group are those who vote out of nostalgia:

”

*I have many acquaintances like that [who vote for the opposition]. Because of their parents, they were raised receiving such ‘brainwashing’. They want to live their lives as they did in the ‘80s. (Győrság, 40y)*

This understanding of the other side was strikingly similar to the logic of accusation heard in the oppositions’ focus group. Whereas the ‘youngsters’ as the other basis of the opposition were categorised as primarily from bigger cities, “liberals, who define freedom as when you can do anything, without any rules”. Several participants named Momentum (the youngest party in the united opposition) as the party associated with this generation and critiqued their lack of experience in leadership, and a phobia of Orbán. Lastly, some marked another category of simply those, who are jealous that for them this regime is not beneficial, thus blaming others for their success. As in this remark, what prevails through the discussion of the governing party and a possible regime change is not only a seemingly unbreakable wall between the two sides’ ideas of the ‘Other’, but also a mirroring of similar arguments. Hence, the phenomenon of political polarization requires closer observation.



### 4.4. Polarization

Hungarian political discourse is highly polarized, which has a strong effect on the whole society. Hence, a high level of affective polarization characterizes the Hungarian society. It means that members of different political camps not only disagree about ideological or policy issues, but they also dislike each other, as a person. The concept of affective polarization was first applied by American political scientists (e.g. Putnam, 2020) to describe the political landscape of the US, where the long-standing two-party system has led to “tribalism” between the supporters of the two major parties. Nowadays, the same tendency is also visible in some European countries, such as in Hungary. Hungarian politics has also become increasingly bipolar in recent years. The next election will be a battle between the current government parties and a united opposition. Most people are either strong supporters of the Fidesz party or strongly critical of the government. So, those who are against Fidesz, are closer to each other, despite the huge ideological differences between the opposition parties. (For example, Jobbik, which is now a center-right opposition party, was founded in the late 2000s as a far-right movement. On the other pole of the opposition camp, there is the social-democratic MSZP, the successor of the marxist Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party.)

We asked both opposition voters and Fidesz voters about the dialogues they have with people from the other political group (i. e. how Fidesz-supporters talk about politics with opposition supporters, and how opposition supporters talk about politics with Fidesz-supporters).

Both groups reported a strong political polarization within their villages. Most of the people in our focus groups surrounded themselves with univocal political opinions, their friends and families tend to have similar political opinions as well.

”

*We talk about politics only with close family. Such a situation can get very angry, so if it's possible, we would rather not talk about it [with those who are not family members]. (Zalamerenye, 45y)*

Participants from the Fidesz group reported that everyone knows the mayors of their villages personally, and each other's political preferences. The political topics in the Fidesz-majority villages also often echo the narrative of the government party.

Many of our focus groups participants prefer to stay away from political debates in case they encounter people from the other camp. Some people noted that there is no room for civilized political discussion. Sometimes they would rather avoid politics, as a topic of discussion – even within the family, because they worry that a political disagreement would trigger a personal quarrel and lasting grievances.

”

*We do not talk about it [politics] with family. We tend to avoid it in the circle of friends as well because there are people who think differently... it is an endless thing... we prefer to keep the friendship. (Győrság, 43y)*

Only a small minority of the participants said that they regularly create or join political discussions where they follow the principle of “agreeing to disagree”.



#### 4. Hungary: Analysis of focus groups

As we observed in our two focus groups, the villages where we can talk about affective polarization are rather close-knit communities. It means that the political beliefs of the local residents are widely known and Fidesz and opposition voters dislike each other. An opposition supporter noted:

**Most people in my village dislike the Jobbik party, however, there are a few people who do support it. They are excluded from our community. For example, if there is a police report [about some crime], people say, it must have been them" [the Jobbik-supporters]. (Sárkeresztúr, 41y )**

Fidesz-supporters also said that they know who the voters of the opposition are in their villages and despise them – they are convinced beyond all that they are in possession of the truth and supporters of the “other side” are simply fooled or out of their minds.

”

*It [the subject of politics] comes up every day in my family. We talk about it with people who are like us. It is impossible to convince the others [opposition supporters] because they do not believe anything, not even that gas has become cheaper... you cannot talk to them about it. (Sárszentágota, 45y)*

Some also noted that the opposition's supporters are unable to get by, so they do not want other people to succeed either.

People in the opposition group also said that they are aware of each other's political preferences, but they avoid discussing topics of political disagreements because they perceive the other group as 'brainwashed' and incompetent to comprehend the truth. This adjective appeared in both groups.

”

*There are some brain-dead people at my workplace [he was referring to opposition-supporters], you cannot tell them [your truth] anyway. [...] You should not stoop to their level because then you will become brain dead too. (Győr-ság, 40y)*

#### 4. Hungary: Analysis of focus groups

We also asked people whether they met in their village activists of any opposition party. Most of the participants did not meet opposition activists in their village, because the activists usually visit larger towns and cities instead. Some noted that in case activists would try to collect signatures in their village, they might be forcibly removed or expelled. Fidesz-supporters also said that they do not encounter political activists of other parties because they all live in villages where the majority (70% or above) supports Fidesz and they would not refrain from verbal assault in case of an encounter as such.

Hence, we could see that in Hungary, politics is a dividing issue even in close communities, therefore there is no wonder that deliberative, inclusive decision-making is not common on the local level. Friends, neighbors and colleagues cannot freely engage into discussions about public issues if they do not agree about their political preferences. That is less and less possible as the media reports are increasingly one-sided, politically motivated, loud and hateful. Politicians cannot reach out to local communities and many rural people have not met any opposition politicians in the past few years.



# 5. Summary and comparison

## 5. 1. Decision-making on the local level

In Poland, supporters of the opposition and the governing party mutually think that in the last 10 years, positive changes took place in their local communities. In both countries, regardless of party preferences, one can notice that progress is interpreted mainly in terms of hard infrastructural investments. However, one can see in the Hungarian groups that changes are perceived very differently among Fidesz and opposition supporters. Voters of the opposition think that those changes do not serve the interest of common people, rather the interest of the local political elite and those who are close to the local pro-government mayor.

In Poland, the role of the local government is „depoliticized” – local authorities are assessed mainly in terms of effectiveness and realization of local needs. In both cases, the dominant feeling is one of relative proximity between the authorities and citizens, which is not particularly abused by the latter. In Hungary, this kind of closeness was mostly reported by the government supporter focus group participants.

The issues of participation in local democratic processes are barely mentioned in the Polish groups. In Hungary, the opposition supporters complained about the lack of involvement citizens experience regarding local decision-making. As most Fidesz supporter participants are usually personally close to the mayor, they do not feel the lack of democracy. They think that the mayor can make good decisions even without asking the locals.

## 5. 2. Economic status and fears

As far as economic status and fears are concerned, in both countries we asked people living in the countryside, who usually have less economic capital and fewer opportunities than those who live in larger cities. Nonetheless, we met different opinions about how people perceive their financial situation and options. In Poland both groups see the future filled with uncertainty and fears rather than hope. In Hungary, the opposition group members had a similar opinion, they see their situation worsening, but the government supporters are quite optimistic. They think that those who work, could improve their ways of living in the past years and they see a bright future ahead in case of no change in political power-relations. They, and even the opposition group highlighted the pro-family subsidies provided by Fidesz that helps mostly middle-class people to improve their financial situation.

In Poland, even the supporters of the government are pessimistic. Law and Justice voters worry about pensions, and salaries that are too low – especially taken into consideration the rising cost of living. However, they do not attribute these problems to the ruling party. They present a rather fatalistic attitude – saying „it is always so, that prices fall” – over which they have no influence. In the Hungarian pro-government group, the participants attribute the problems some people face today to the lack of work and ambition “those” economically deprived people have. It means that pro-government people believe that Fidesz provides good opportunities for anyone enabling people to live a better life.

In both countries, non-materialistic fears appeared as well. In Poland, Law and Justice voters expressed their fear from the outside world, of the West and its anti-values, which may violate the conservative foundations of their vision of social order. Western values are regarded as tools that can break down the traditional family and bonds within the community. Polish opposition voters' fears are more long-term in nature.

## 5. Summary and comparison

They concern the future of their children and the following generations. They mentioned fears about the increasing indebtedness of the state, which reminds them of the period of real socialism in Poland during the late 1970s, when the state was indebted to an extreme extent.

Apart from fears related to a potential economic crisis, concerns about the planet's future, climate change, and environmental pollution were signalled. These fears did not appear at all among Law and Justice voters. In Hungary, opposition voters worry about the shift in public atmosphere, meaning that people can get into a difficult situation, if they express their political opinion. The possibility of changing the current government was also a crucial issue in Hungary. People say their future prospects are depending on the next elections. Fidesz-supporters fear a regime change very much, but not even the opposition supporters are convinced that a new government formed by the current opposition parties will be able to effectively and successfully manage the country's affairs. In both Poland and Hungary, the supporters of the government expressed their antipathy towards the young liberal people who divert from traditional conservative ways of thinking and endanger traditional values. The family is also a highly politicized issue in Hungary, and conservative Fidesz-supporters fear any diversion from the traditional family model as well as in Poland. However, this issue was not raised in the focus discussions.

It is apparent that in Hungary, people's subjective economic position is closely intertwined with the upcoming general elections and a possible regime change, more so than in Poland. Nevertheless, supporters of the governing party both mentioned a future regime change as one that would strongly impact their status and future. Whether fears over economic decline or a de-stabilization of their values and beliefs, the state of the present governing parties of both Poles and Hungarians are central to citizens' perceptions of their future.

### 5. 3. Evaluation of the governing party and opinion about the regime change

When we talk about the evaluation of the governing party and opinions about the regime change, the common belief that appears in both countries is a general criticism towards politics and politicians. In Poland both groups regard the sphere of politics as a nasty business, and participation in elections is seen as an unpleasant duty. It seems, however, that when describing political choices and disappointments, in both countries, the government and the opposition's electorate always see the other as „the bad guys” – when a group says that „politicians are bad,” they implicitly see their political opponents and recall their scandals.

In Poland, despite their party being in power, among Law and Justice voters there is a constant sense of exclusion. They do not understand why they are being attacked when their predecessors were corrupt as well, only they were unable to share. „They steal, but they share” is one of the main justifications for electoral support of Law and Justice in participants' accounts. This last idea, that corruption is not so terrible, if there is some benefit for average people, appeared in the pro-Fidesz group as well. They reported that they see the mistakes of the government, but it is still the best option. At the same time, Fidesz supporters are much prouder to their political opinion and choice, as they see Fidesz, and Viktor Orbán especially as a strong leader who can provide a great future for the country and for common people.

At the same time, it is interesting to see from the interviews that in Poland, Law and Justice voters may be ashamed of voting for their preferred party. However, they claim to simply have no other option. It should be noted that the government's socially conservative electorate, for whom the Church, tradition, and social support are important, has no political alternative to Law and Justice. They talk about politics in a perfunctory and distrustful way. This idea, that “there is no better option”, also appeared in the Hungarian groups.



## 5. Summary and comparison

Conversely, government supporters in Hungary usually compare the current regime to the socialist era, in that they grew up, and with that they identify the united opposition. This later narrative, that the opposition is “leftist” is also often highlighted in the Fidesz-led media (despite the fact that there is a diverse palette in ideologies among the opposition parties).

In Poland, the opposition’s electorate is eager to criticize the ruling camp and all those who support the government. In these statements, there is grief, frustration, disappointment, and pessimism connected with the fact that Law and Justice buys itself electoral support through social transfers. In Hungary, opposition supporters recognize some advantages Fidesz provides for middle-class families, but they are disenchanted – primarily because of the corruption of the governing elite. The most vocal critics of the government stated that the level of Fidesz’s arrogance reached a critical height: the government does not even pretend that it is innocent, stealing of the national wealth became business as usual.

In Poland, the conflict between the voters of Law and Justice and opposition has another, deeper dimension. It is a part of the spatial division „village” vs. „city”, as well as the conflict of values „tradition” vs. „modernity”. Finally, it is a generational conflict between the „young (as carriers of modernity) and „old” (as carriers of tradition). In Hungary, people while reasoning along ideological lines, rather emphasized the material benefits Fidesz gave them or did not give them. Migration policy or defending national sovereignty within the EU by Fidesz, were favoured by the opposition voters as well, so these issues are not at the core of the conflict between Fidesz and opposition supporters among rural voters.

## 5. 4. Polarization

Polarization was a salient issue in both countries. Both in Hungary and in Poland both opposition and government supporters define the initial situation similarly – people rather do not talk about politics anymore because it causes too much personal conflicts and divides families. Some people noted that there is no room for civilized political discussion. This can be also traced back to the time of communism when politics and debate were taboo completely and people had to have a black and white worldview (Palonen, 2009).

In Poland further reasons for not engaging in dialogue were mentioned. Voters of the Law and Justice party avoid engagement because they have low discursive skills. They often feel oppressed and cornered. Opposition voters, in turn, do not want to engage in dialogue because they have a sense of moral superiority filled with aggression towards political opponents.

In Hungary, on the other hand both groups had a similarly degrading opinion about the other side's supporters. Fidesz and opposition supporters also called people with different political opinions as 'brainwashed'.

## 5. Summary and comparison

There is a constant debate even within academia whether polarization comes from the elite, the mass or the media. The participants in the Polish groups reported that they see the reasons for this state of affairs in the attitudes of politicians and the media, from which they most often draw justifications for their own arguments. In Hungary, the media is also highly polarized, and for rural people there is even a bigger problem, that many can only access the government's propaganda.

People in our study were not positive about the divided nature of their societies, they have no idea how to dissolve political cleavages in the future.



## 6. Conclusion

All in all, this study shed light on the complexity of the question, why are the governing parties so popular in Poland and Hungary. Whilst there is no definite answer, the four focus groups the 21 Research Center and Projekt:Polska conducted revealed different aspects on every level of inquiry; from economic expectations' close connection to the regime change, to the communist legacy echoed in the distrust in politics and politicians. The groups of the two countries revealed dissimilarities, pointing at the variations in the leadership of Fidesz and PiS, one example of which was the more central figure of Orban in Hungary. Nevertheless, the following will focus on the shared traits of the two, rather than the country-specific differences, in order to paint a comprehensive picture.

Analysing the two countries next to each other showed similarities that are possibly characteristic of the region in general. It emphasized that when assessing voter motivations behind choosing the Hungarian and Polish governing parties, the political landscape ruled by polarization is perhaps the most prevalent factor in the formation of political preferences. It is not only the populist rhetoric and media that is successful in creating the image of 'Us' versus 'Them', but the specific policies targeting certain groups of society. Pro-family policies were marked in both countries as attractive, along with an ideological groundedness in traditional values.

At the same time, the common disenchantment detectable in all focus group participants may suggest that the disappointment in previous political regimes made the voters of these countries more content with their current governments, offering stability and economic prosperity for them. The fact that not all society can benefit from this government and that corruption and theft is well-known have little impact on the government supporters, while making these parties unacceptable for the opposition. The lack of political discourse in the public and the demonization of the 'other side' by the media affects these observed small rural communities the most. From participants' accounts, one can face the disturbing reality that people may live their life next to each other, trapped in a world of their own, without any inclination to engage more in democratic processes or understand the other.

We observed that people in rural Hungary and Poland feel that they face more and more economic problems compared to those who live in cities. According to participants, the support small villages and cities get from the EU or from the government, often does not serve the interest of the average people. They think even if local citizens see the problems of their municipality, they cannot channel their opinion and interest into local decision-making processes. It would be beneficial for all if local people could feel more involved in public issues. There is a need for a complete change of attitude, that can be achieved by providing platforms for civilized discussion where people from different parties can freely express their opinion. Participants noted that the mayor and the local council would need to become more responsive and make their decision-making processes more transparent and involved.

## 6. Conclusion

It was disappointing to see the strong polarization in the two countries. At times of a decline in democratic processes on behalf of the two countries' leaders results in strong elite polarization, when average people should find a common language. But naturally the hatred among the elite trickled down to the level of local communities because of the divisive messages people see in the media. Therefore, even locals, friends and colleagues with different political opinions avoid discussion or even worse, they degrade each other. If there is no room for discussion between people from different "tribes", that endangers the state of democracies, which are already in a bad shape in the respective countries. People become more and more cynical with the sense of public issues and people's trust decreases in the government (Putnam, 2020). Civility would be very much needed in these vulnerable societies. Perhaps the comparison discussed above can help with this as well, including the establishment of more and more platforms to express one's opinion and more decisions preceded by a public discussion.

Even non-local, national politicians should learn from this small study that rural people do not feel understood and involved in important issues. The governing parties in both countries disregard what average people need. People are treated as children who should fit into their given place in society and enjoy the governments' benefits, which are hardly enough for everyone to have a good standard of living. Therefore, a public figure could achieve more success if they went on the spot and talked to the locals, facilitated free and honest discussions, and represented their authentic interests.

# Bibliography

About Hungary. (2016). Putting Families at the Core: the Family Housing Support Program (CSOK) <https://abouthungary.hu/issues/putting-families-at-the-core-the-family-housing-support-program-csok>

Bíró-Nagy, András. (2018). Politikai lottóötös: a migráció jelentősége a magyar politikában, 2014–2018. Böcskei Balázs–Szabó Andrea (szerk.): Várakozások és valóságok. Parlamenti választás

Cianetti, Licia – Dawson, James – Hanley, Seán. (2018). Rethinking “democratic backsliding” in Central and Eastern Europe – looking beyond Hungary and Poland. *East European Politics*, 34(3), 243–256.

Csaba, Tóth – Andrea, Szabó. (2018). A győztes mindent visz? A 2018-as választás eredményei. Böcskei Balázs–Szabó Andrea (szerk.): Várakozások és valóságok. Parlamenti választás

fidesz-eu.hu. (2019). All you need to know about the latest in Hungary’s pro-family policy. <https://fidesz-eu.hu/en/all-you-need-to-know-about-the-latest-in-hungarys-pro-family-policy/>

Hegedüs, Daniel. (2019). Rethinking the incumbency effect. Radicalization of governing populist parties in East-Central-Europe. A case study of Hungary. *European Politics and Society*, 20(4), 406–430.

Markowski, Radoslaw. (2019). Creating Authoritarian Clientelism: Poland After 2015. *Hague J Rule Law* 11, 111–132. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-018-0082-5>



Palonen, Emilia. (2009). Political polarisation and populism in contemporary Hungary. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62(2), 318–334.

Putnam, Robert. D. (2020). *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do it Again*. Simon & Schuster.

Róna, Dániel – Galgóczy, Eszter – Pétervári, Judit – Szeitl, Blanka – Túry, Márton. (2020). The Fidesz Party's Secret to Success: Investigating Economic Voting in Hungary

Sadurski, Wojciech. (2018). How Democracy Dies (in Poland): A Case Study of Anti-Constitutional Populist Backsliding. *Revista Forumul Jurdecatorilor* 104

Stanley, Liam. (2016). Using focus groups in political science and international relations. *Politics*, 36(3), 236–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395715624120>



projekt: **polska**<sup>®</sup>

**21**  
Research Center



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

Central Europe and the Baltic States

