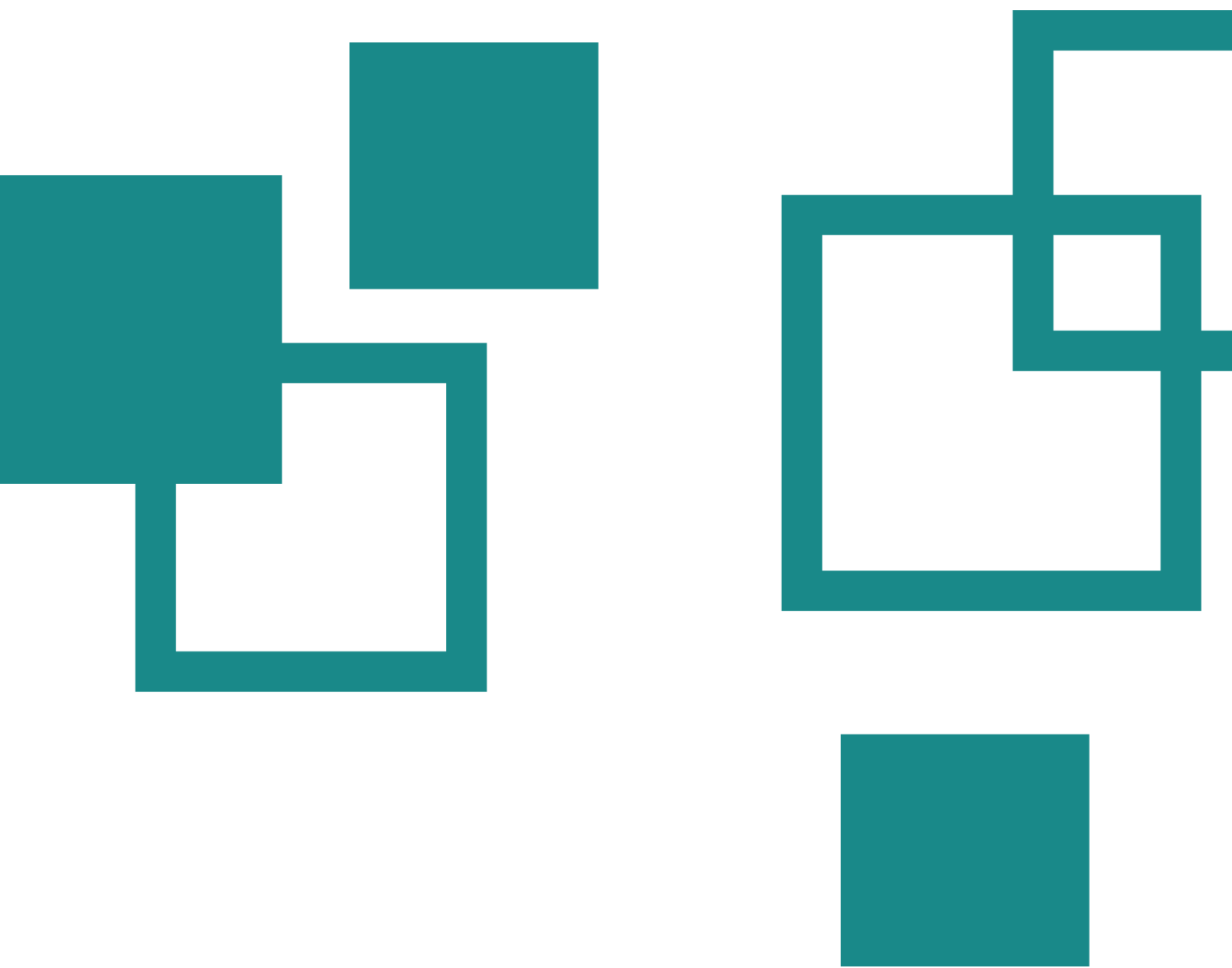


Can They ever win? The Past and Future Prospects for an Opposition Victory in Hungary's Competitive Authoritarian Regime

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Viktor Orbán's fourth consecutive electoral victory in Hungary's [competitive authoritarian regime](#) caught many observers by surprise. [Most opinion polls](#) predicted a much tighter race than Orbán's landslide of an 18 percentage point victory over the opposition and the largest majority to date in the Hungarian parliament. For a long time, the opposite scenario of an opposition victory looked plausible, if not outright likely, until the final weeks of the campaign. After more than a decade in opposition marked by internecine conflict, high party turnover, and futile attempts to squeeze out rivals seen as destructive to the common cause, six opposition parties finally looked set to put the past behind them, accepting the inevitable logic of a majoritarian electoral system which is tailor-made, to its finest details, for Orbán's electoral interests. Having organized two successful rounds of primary elections, they aligned behind 106 joint candidates in all of Hungary's electoral districts. Most importantly, they also elected a common prime ministerial candidate to take on Orbán himself: Péter Márki-Zay, an effective mayor of a mid-sized Hungarian town and a self-proclaimed conservative, hailing from outside the political elite. The stage seemed set for a showdown between two political camps of roughly equal size with Orbán's political future in the balance.

The rest, as the saying goes, is history. Yet, history appeared to repeat itself again and the fourth defeat of the opposition is now prompting an ever louder chorus of pundits and analysts to ask the most fundamental question of all that underpins the political regime that Viktor Orbán has built up over 12 uninterrupted years in power: is he, and his ruling party, *Fidesz*, even defeatable? Alternatively, did the Hungarian opposition pursue an optimal electoral strategy, given the circumstances, and was it simply too naive to believe from the start that Orbán could be defeated via elections?

In this article, we shall attempt to provide partial answers to these questions by zooming in on the election campaign itself. Our first argument is that

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the uneven playing field, which is the most important hallmark of competitive authoritarian regimes, has incrementally grown from election to election and Orbán's major resource advantages in the campaign manifested themselves via various channels.

This chimes with an [important observation](#) about how modern autocracies work in the 21st century: instead of intimidation, terror, and violence, their most effective

weapon is the (near) monopoly over political communication and nominally independent institutions that are *de facto* all but an extended arm of the government and the ruling party.

We also argue, however, that these resource advantages did not automatically translate into Orbán's landslide on election night. We posit that two diametrically opposed communication strategies by the two political camps were equally important determinants of the election outcome.

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While Orbán's propaganda machine harnessed the discursive arsenal of the populist radical right by appealing to the economic and cultural losers of economic globalization and European integration, the opposition - willingly or not - addressed an entirely different kind of political audience: the well-educated, cosmopolitan, urban upper- and middle-classes.

Although these social groups are highly visible within Hungary's economic and cultural elite, they are vastly outnumbered by the ruling party's electoral coalition concentrated in Hungary's marginalized communities in the countryside and the post-industrial rust belt. In other words, the government's resource advantages were a necessary but not a sufficient condition for their greatest electoral victory to date.

The reasons behind Orbán's electoral domination of the Hungarian political landscape tend to run under three competing, albeit not mutually exclusive, narratives. The first narrative originates from the default political science perspective, which is especially prominent in the analysis of liberal democracies: performance voting. According to this perspective, Orbán secures his repeated electoral victories by delivering tangible results to large swathes of the electorate, or as succinctly captured by an old cliché in Hungarian political lay-discourse, because “at least they know how to govern”.

This interpretation undoubtedly carries a grain of truth. After early budget balancing efforts and a difficult external economic environment in the wake of the Eurocrisis in 2010-2012, the Hungarian economy enjoyed 7 years of uninterrupted growth until

the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the economy was plunged into recession in 2020 as a result of Europe-wide lockdowns, it bounced back forcefully in 2021, growing by more than 7%. The employment turnaround during this period was even more spectacular. Having displayed one of the lowest employment rates in the EU around the time of Orbán coming to power, the Hungarian economy finished last year with an employment rate of 77.6%, 5 percentage points above the EU average. To some extent, this is due to an extensive [public works programme](#), introduced in 2011. However, employment rates over this period have increased across the board in both the public and the private sector. Most importantly, this employment turnaround went hand in hand with a solid increase in average net wages, growing between 4 and 12% per annum, leading to a palpable increase in consumption volumes and living standards. All in all, the result may have just been down to “the economy, stupid”.

However, a sole focus on the economic track record as an explanation for Orbán’s victory is short-sighted. First, during the pandemic, government support to the economy was meager at best, leaving entire economic sectors, such as hospitality, out in the cold [without any meaningful government support](#). Secondly, there is a lot more to performance evaluations than the economy. Although voters do not assess the government’s performance in managing the pandemic as particularly bad, a stubborn fact continued to linger above the government’s head as a sword of Damocles: Hungary displayed the single highest headline mortality rate during the pandemic in the EU. The verdict is hardly more benign when focusing on the more comparable excess mortality statistics.

High mortality is intricately linked to another area where the government’s performance has been modest at best and outright disastrous at worst: the social sector. The [under-funded healthcare sector](#) has long been subject to intense criticism and it is widely seen by voters as the most problematic issue area. Similar criticism has been levelled at the state of public education, which suffers from excessive centralization, dilapidated infrastructure, and dismal pay and employment conditions for workers. To the extent that the long-term performance of knowledge economies and societies depends on their capacity to accumulate, maintain, and upgrade their human capital stock, the Orbán government’s record should have supplied plenty of political ammunition for the opposition to exploit.

One of the reasons why the opposition failed to capitalize on this opportunity leads us to the second narrative: the uneven playing field that is so characteristic of competitive authoritarian regimes. This narrative is particularly prominent in opposition circles as it purports to exonerate them from repeated failures to turn

the tide. Surely, the narrative is not without merits. While a complete summary of how Orbán used his constitutional super-majorities to steer Hungary from a liberal democracy based on the Rule of Law and checks and balances towards an illiberal state has been [provided elsewhere](#), we shall focus on a particular aspect that played a particularly prominent role in the campaign: resource advantages and clientelist networks.

Orbán had long recognized the importance of a loyal media empire before coming to power in 2010. With the help of his former ally and friend, Lajos Simicska, he managed to maintain a core set of media outlets in opposition as a voice for the Hungarian right. Upon coming to power, he left little to chance.

From one electoral cycle to the next, Orbán incrementally increased the government's grip over the media landscape by establishing a new supervisory body over media content, by providing lavish funding to public media in exchange for unwavering loyalty to the government, and by amassing an ever growing share of private media via pro-government businessmen and proxies and centralizing them under a [recently established foundation](#) (KESMA) to harmonize their content, i.e. government propaganda. Among the long list of casualties of this offensive, *Népszabadság*, a prestigious printed daily, *Klub Rádió*, a liberal radio channel, and *Index*, the most widely read independent internet news portal were all either driven out of business or bought up and gradually “domesticated” and brought in line with the government's narrative. Illustratively, during the campaign the opposition candidate for prime minister received one single invitation to public television where he was given five minutes to introduce the opposition's program.

The little independent media that remained was largely restricted to online news with an inherently limited capacity to compete with the government-dominated traditional media outlets among demographic groups beyond the urban, educated, and internet-savvy middle classes. Unsurprisingly, a [post-election poll](#) found that a solid majority of voters believed that Márki-Zay wanted to send Hungarian troops to the war in Ukraine (one of the government propaganda's largely unfounded tropes in the final stages of the campaign). Where there is only one single voice, that voice tends to prevail regardless of some of its absurdities.

But the near-monopoly of the airwaves is just one part of a larger story of resource and information advantages in the hands of the ruling party, an [important pillar of authoritarian rule](#) in the 21st century. The ruling party's resource advantages manifested themselves in the campaign through vastly outspending the opposition both [online](#) and [offline](#), as well as through a near-complete overlap between the party and the state. A case in point is the use of a national mailing list dating back

to the COVID-19 vaccination drive as a vehicle for negative campaigning against the opposition.

The origins of these resource advantages are as important as their specific manifestations in the campaign. The short answer is a widespread and highly elaborate maze of clientelist practices that cemented a hierarchically dependent relationship between the government and various segments of Hungarian society. On the top, the government has systematically groomed a vast network of business clientele - casually and somewhat hyperbolically referred to as the “[oligarchs](#)” - who stood to benefit from various public procurement tenders with EU funding. Application criteria, project deadlines, and administrative details have been often carefully calibrated to make sure that no one else could plausibly win apart from the designated beneficiaries. With this unprecedented accumulation of wealth in the hands of government proxies - among whom one can find István Tiborcz, Orbán’s son-in-law and Lőrinc Mészáros, a gas mechanic turned multi-billionaire and mayor of Orbán’s town of birth - the ruling party has established a solid source of financial support. Should anyone raise concerns on legal grounds, the buck usually stops at the public prosecutor’s office, headed by a loyal Orbán ally with an unparalleled ability to sweep cases under the carpet.

To understand how these resource advantages translate into votes, the second aspect of Hungarian clientelism is equally important to highlight. Various [post-election analyses](#) have uncovered a close relationship between votes for the ruling party and economic and social precarity in a given locality. One aspect of such precarity is the share of the population enrolled in the aforementioned public works programme. [Stories abound](#) about how local mayors exploit local citizens’ dependence on virtually the only source of income in town in order to elicit political compliance (i.e. voting for the ruling party). Similarly, vote-buying has become common practice either in the form of goods or cash (anecdotal estimates range between 3000 and 10000 HUFs, around 8-30 euros for a vote). Other forms of illegal mobilization of voters include organized bus transport of voters to the polling stations and so-called “chain-voting” whereby ballots that are already filled out are given to voters outside the polling station who are then asked to cast that vote and bring out the empty ballots which are to be given to the next target.

How systematically these practices occur is anyone’s guess but [a survey conducted](#) by the authors of this article has found that between 10 and 20% of young voters and female voters have heard of at least one form of fraud occurring in their social environment. The extent to which these forms of electoral manipulation proved essential for Orbán’s victory remains an open question. In light of his margin

of victory, as well as his resource advantages over the opposition, they probably weren't decisive. However, as we know from the political science literature on electoral fraud, autocrats don't cheat merely to win - [they cheat to win big](#).

Against this backdrop, it would be all too tempting to conclude retrospectively that Orbán's fourth consecutive electoral victory has always been a foregone conclusion.

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If history is any guide, however, competitive authoritarian regimes that are even more socially embedded than the Hungarian one can be defeated at the ballot box.

Mexico's PRI party, for instance, [lost and bowed out in 2000](#) after 71 uninterrupted years in power. Malaysia's UMNO, riding the waves of ethnic nationalism, appeared to stand on even more solid grounds and [yet it was defeated](#), against all odds, in 2018.

We thus argue that Orbán is not invincible even in the highly uneven political playing field that he has created, which brings us to the third narrative behind the opposition's defeat. Specifically, we contend that the Hungarian opposition made a strategic miscalculation in the campaign and employed a fundamentally flawed communication strategy that contributed to their disastrous result on election night.

To consider why this is so, let us begin with a quick glance at the electoral map. What emerges is a country divided in two: while Budapest is dominated by the opposition (blue), the rest of the country largely blooms orange (*Fidesz*) on the map after the 2022 elections. However, the real difference lies deeper than colors or political camps. It lies between those with a degree and those without, between white-collar and blue-collar workers, between those who can afford to spend hours on the internet every day and those who lack internet access altogether, between white Hungarians and the Roma, between cosmopolitans and those who have never travelled abroad or do not speak any foreign languages. The former spend much more time consuming political news and, given their relative material well-being, they also deal with abstract matters and principles that do not directly affect them. The latter, on the other hand, tend not to deal with such matters, and they can only spend a few minutes per day gathering information on public life. While the first

group has been dominated by the opposition for a long time, [research finds](#) that the second group expresses outstanding support for *Fidesz*.

This phenomenon is certainly not uncommon in other parts of the world: voters of the [Polish ruling party](#), [Trump](#), [Marine Le Pen](#), or [Brexit](#), and the supporters of a plethora of other populist, radical right-wing parties share this social background with Orbán's supporters. The fault line lies between the winners and losers of globalization. Belittling these populists and ignoring the wishes of their supporters is therefore of no help. Instead, the right strategy should focus on listening to them, understanding their needs, and offering political representation to them - something the Hungarian opposition has failed to do thus far.

Despite the government's resource advantages in the media landscape, as elaborated above,

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[research shows](#) that “only” one-fifth of the Hungarian population lives in a secluded pro-government media bubble, while the rest of society can be potentially reached by at least partly independent media outlets, and it is nearly impossible to entirely avoid opposition voices on Facebook.

The issue is therefore not so much the lack of alternative sources of political information as the fact that the overwhelming dominance of pro-government media can easily crowd out the multi-faceted, rapidly changing, and difficult-to-grasp political messages sent by the opposition. It is in this context that this article wishes to highlight the importance of “benevolent populism” (in its non-academic sense) which the opposition severely lacked in its 2022 election campaign. We illustrate these points by the following four observations.

First, the opposition could not break out from its political bubble. Despite their - much-needed - commitment to cooperation, the six opposition parties remained each other's rivals for they have traditionally targeted the same electorate and addressed the same issue areas.

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Spending a disproportionate amount of their resources in Budapest during the primary elections, party leaders discussed issues of corruption, political accountability, and constitutional reform - issues that are of little concern to undecided voters, a large share of whom live under financially precarious conditions in the countryside.

The fact that the six parties - with the partial exception of *Demokratikus Koalíció* (DK) and *Jobbik* - had weak party structures and even weaker social embeddedness outside their Budapest headquarters certainly did not help in reaching beyond this political bubble.

This pattern did not change much throughout the election campaign, with the leader of the opposition Péter Márki-Zay addressing topics that concern the political elite rather than the electorate. He discussed opinion polls, alleged traitors within opposition circles, the establishment of his own parliamentary group, and even election observers sent by OSCE. Such themes would be unthinkable for Orbán's communication that is much more mindful of the cognitive boundaries and thematic concerns of the voters that they aim to target.

Secondly, the complexity of the themes discussed by the opposition's prime ministerial candidate was mirrored in his Facebook activity, both in its substance and its form. His posts and advertisements were complex, lengthy, and at times complicated, while Orbán generally phrased his messages in a single sentence. Therefore, Márki-Zay - perhaps unknowingly - aimed at reaching the well-educated and politically aware elite, while Orbán targeted people with only a few minutes to spare for politics per day, i.e. the wider strata of Hungarian society.

Thirdly, *Fidesz* was able to utilize the Russian invasion of Ukraine in its electoral campaign better than the opposition. While portraying the opposition as a force plunging the country into war, the incumbent party distinguished themselves by claiming to stand for peace, security, and cheap energy. These are three crucial issues of utmost importance for undecided and poorer voters, thereby transforming the issue of war into a tangible and personal question for a large proportion of the electorate. In contrast, the opposition's first take on the war was to highlight the

victimhood of Ukrainians and blame Putin as the sole aggressor who needs to be stopped and punished.

Regardless of the ethical merits of this position, uncertain voters are [divided over the question of whom to blame](#) and, more importantly, this is not an issue that they perceive as directly affecting their lives. While these voters may acknowledge that [Orbán steered Hungary too close to Russia, they find his shuttlecock policy between east and west to be beneficial](#) because they see Russia as a major economic power to reckon with. Foreign policy decisions based on morality are outweighed by the perceived impact on voters' own material well-being.

Without ignoring the [rally-round-the-flag effect](#), the [rise in the governing party's popularity](#) can therefore partly be attributed to this communication strategy: the opposition reinforced the identity of their own supporters without reaching out to undecided voters, in contrast to the governing party. All this was amplified by the fact that the governing party was quicker and better able to adapt its messages than the opposition, bound as it was by the power-sharing arrangement of the six constituent parties.

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The majority of the opposition's communication was vague and distant for ordinary citizens, centering around issues not directly affecting their lives, such as the introduction of the Euro, political accountability, or the establishment of an independent Ministry of Education. In the later stages of the campaign, there were some more direct messages promising costly but tangible benefits, such as doubling the family allowance or waiving the tuition fee for first university degrees. However, these promises never ended up making it onto billboards. With only a few articles

and Facebook posts, these topics could not reach the center-stage of the campaign and had little chance of reaching the wide strata of undecided voters.

At this point, it would be futile to engage in a counter-factual exercise and try to predict with any precision what the opposition might have achieved with a more consistent, more disciplined, and unified communication strategy, using less intellectual and more “populist” expressions. Most likely they would have lost the elections anyway given the uneven playing field of the electoral race and the reasonably benign economic track record of the government. However, the margin of defeat could have surely been reduced with a communication strategy that addressed the losers of globalization in general and those left behind by the pre-pandemic economic boom in particular.

As far as the future is concerned, despite the limited chances for electoral success electoral competition and broad opposition cooperation still seems to be [the best recipe against authoritarian regimes](#). What is certain, however, is that understanding and addressing this “other Hungary” cannot be left until the next campaign: building a new opposition strategy has to start now.

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