

# HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2022

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## THE RESULTS

Another victory for Fidesz in the 2022 Hungarian elections was not unexpected, as none of the polls during the campaign had shown that the opposition could win a majority. What was a surprise was the extent of Fidesz's success, beating the united opposition by more than 17 percentage points (Table 1), with the opposition only winning in Budapest and two other big cities. Everywhere else, the ruling party's candidates emerged victorious. Despite the uneven playing field, no one had expected such a large margin.

At 69.54% in Hungary proper, turnout was slightly below that of the 2018 election when 70.22% of the electorate voted. Nevertheless, turnout was high by historical standards. The turnout in the 2018 election had been the second-highest since the democratic transition, and 2022 came close.<sup>1</sup>

Defying the expectations of the opposition, Fidesz won 86 of the 88 seats in single-member districts outside Budapest, defending all of its previously held seats and recapturing the

town of Dunaújváros, once a left-wing bastion that the Socialists had carried by a margin of 65-35 in 2006 (it was won by a Jobbik candidate in 2018). The opposition held on to its only two other seats outside Budapest, one each in the cities of Szeged and Pécs.

The minimum expectation for the opposition was that it would be able to capture many of the large urban areas it had won in the 2019 municipal election. The election of opposition mayors in large cities across Hungary at the time fed the hope that at least the parliamentary seats in these cities could swing towards the opposition. Reality shaped up very differently, however, with Fidesz not only defending these seats but mostly even expanding its lead over the opposition.

## HUNGARY DIVIDED BETWEEN BUDAPEST AND THE REST

At the 2022 elections, it was only in the capital itself that the opposition's victories in single-member districts largely

Table 1

**Results of the votes for party lists in the Hungarian national parliamentary election of 2022 (vote totals only for the vote within Hungary)**

| Party list           | % Share of the votes in 2018 within Hungary | % Share of the votes in 2022 within Hungary | Total number of votes in 2022 | Seats in 2018 | Seats in 2022 |
|----------------------|---|---|-------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Fidesz-KDNP          | 47.36                                       | 51.34                                       | 2,717,308                     | 133           | 135           |
| United Opposition    | 48.91 <sup>1</sup>                          | 34.09                                       | 1,804,587                     | 65            | 56            |
| Our Homeland         | –   | 6.00  | 317,779                       | –             | 7             |
| Two-Tailed Dog Party | 1.79  | 3.20  | 169,388                       | 0             | 0             |

Note: results as of 6 April 2022. Source: valasztas.hu.

<sup>1</sup> The aggregate share of the votes won by the five party lists that ran separately in the 2018 election but jointly in 2022 (the joint list of MSZP and Dialogue for Hungary (MSZP-PM), Democratic Coalition (DK), Jobbik, and Politics Can Be Different (LMP)). For 2018, we also added Together, a smaller left-wing party which won about 0.7% of the vote, far below the 5% threshold in 2018.

conformed to expectations, with the United for Hungary list sweeping 16 of the 18 districts in the capital. Symbolically significant is that Fidesz has lost all four of the traditionally conservative districts in Buda. Before 2010, a victory of left-wing candidates in all of them seemed inconceivable. It is

unlikely that these conservative areas had shifted ideologically, what seems more likely is that their mostly wealthy and educated voters were put off by Fidesz's communication and policies in recent years. The two districts in Budapest where the opposition candidates are losing based on the current count are actually suburban districts which are demographically similar to the more conservative districts in the Budapest metropolitan area (Pest County), where the opposition also failed to pick up any of the seats it had been favoured to win.

Thus, Fidesz did not only defend its hold over rural Hungary, which was widely expected even in light of the polls that painted a much more favourable picture for the opposition than the reality of 3 April, but it also tightened its grip over almost the entirety of urban Hungary outside Budapest. Thus, the urban-rural divide is now mostly a Budapest vs. the rest of Hungary divide, although it is true that on the whole Fidesz was relatively weaker and the opposition was stronger in urban areas as compared to the ruling party's overwhelming majorities in villages and small towns.

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## THE VANISHING OPPOSITION VOTERS

The most stunning surprise of 3 April was not Fidesz's victory or its roughly 52% of the vote within Hungary but that the opposition performed 10-11 points below the result anticipated by the major polling companies, even five points below the most pessimistic major poll for the opposition, produced by the Medián company. Even more significantly, the opposition trailed its own 2018 results by almost 14% points. Although turnout was only slightly lower than in 2018, the joint list of the opposition parties received about 900,000 votes fewer than in the last parliamentary election, when their aggregated support of nearly 2.7 million votes was almost identical to Fidesz's tally on 3 April 2022.

Although as of now we know very little about the voters who stayed home or switched their support to Fidesz on 3 April, we suspect that many of them were likely Jobbik voters, based on the demographic distribution of the turnout and of the support for Our Homeland, the far-right party that was formed by former Jobbik politicians who left the party in protest of its centrist drift. Turnout was lower in the areas where Jobbik used to be the leading opposition party while Our Homeland tended to do better in these regions.

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## ORBÁN, THE WARRIOR FOR PEACE

Fidesz's message of neutrality on the war in Ukraine appears to have resonated heavily with voters, more so even than the polls of partisan preferences could capture. It quickly became clear that the idea of keeping Hungary out

of the conflict would be popular, with polls by both pro-Fidesz and other polling companies showing that a large majority of Hungarians agreed that above all they wanted their country to avoid being sucked into the war. Based on the numbers, this large majority also included many of those who unequivocally professed that the war was an act of unjustifiable Russian aggression.

The massive pro-Fidesz media empire hammered home the message that Viktor Orbán and Fidesz were most likely to guarantee that Hungary would not become militarily involved in any conflict with Russia, and they compounded the impact of this message by taking a quote by Péter Márki-Zay out of context to propagate the idea that the opposition would insert Hungary into the war in Ukraine as a warring party. None of the firm denials of the opposition were reflected in either Fidesz's communication or in the identical communication of the sprawling media empire which uncritically disseminated and amplified this partisan message.

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## IT'S THE ECONOMY

Concern about the war often went hand in hand with concerns about its economic implications, and Fidesz's successful narrative framework of its ability to preserve peace was also openly intertwined with the promise that it was best equipped to give the Hungarian economy a protective buffer against the increasingly dire financial reverberations of the war in Ukraine. The prime minister's communication on the war was very naked in stating that the needs of the Hungarian economy were paramount. And what irked many European politicians because of the triumph of naked materialism over ideological and humanitarian considerations – leading to the cancellation of the V4 summit of defence ministers in Hungary – seems to have appealed to many voters who not only saw Orbán as the guarantor of peace and security, but as the best guarantee against rising energy prices as well.

The impression of the government's ability to help financially was reinforced by lavish campaign spending totalling over 1,000 billion forints (ca. 2.7 billion euros) in February alone (leading to a record deficit), aimed at millions of pensioners, who received a whole month of extra pension, and families, which received a massive income tax rebate, many in the amount of their entire income tax payment in 2021. Even as polls showed that the rising inflation rate worries voters, the huge amount of money thrown at them by the government appears to have succeeded in mitigating their fears. Whether offsetting inflation with government spending is sustainable is of course a different question – Orbán himself refused to rule out cutbacks –, but they were suitable as stopgap measures to reinforce Fidesz's support. Given the opposition's lack of access to funds to distribute, they were limited in their ability to convince the public of their commitment to help citizens financially in a difficult

period. Nevertheless, the opposition campaign did not place pocketbook concerns sufficiently at the centre of its campaign.

In an interesting twist, both inflation and the war, arguably the two key concerns in this election, ultimately boosted Fidesz, as Viktor Orbán successfully cast himself as an experienced hand with a long record of economic growth running against a political rookie who led a hopscotch alliance of odd bedfellows, pre-eminently including former prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, who Fidesz said was in control of the alliance.

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## THE OPPOSITION'S SHARE OF THE BLAME

Ultimately, it was the opposition parties that entered the race despite their awareness of how far the playing field tilted against them, and ultimately the voters' judgment was also about their performance. Fair or not, 35% is a damning judgment, especially in light of the fact that the bar for the opposition parties was the almost 49% they achieved within Hungary in 2018. They wanted to do better but did far worse.

The opposition united formally, that is it agreed on the primary system to select candidates, a joint platform and a joint slate of candidates. Even though the joint list gave itself the name United for Hungary it never did seem that united. When Jobbik chair Péter Jakab and the leader of the Democratic Coalition, Ferenc Gyurcsány, attacked Péter Márki-Zay within hours of the disastrous result, the thought on many people's mind was not that this was surprising but rather that it was just what they expected.

The widespread criticism that the opposition parties had no joint platform beyond ousting Orbán was not true, and in fact if one tracked the issues pushed by the opposition parties in the years before they united to form a joint electoral bloc, it became apparent that they have policy interests in common, sharing similar preferences on several major policy issues, including many economic, social, healthcare and education policies, not to mention the most important issues that united them, their opposition to the erosion of the rule of law and democracy, which figured prominently in their communication and manifestos. Still, this was and remained a diverse alliance that united for a pragmatic goal, and the campaign period did not conceal this fact.

The lack of coherence is understandable, since their cooperation was forced by the electoral system and no one involved suggested that these parties would have run on a joint list had they not been forced onto one by the majoritarian electoral system (as well as by the changes specifically enacted by the ruling party in 2020 to force them into such a position). Nevertheless, the lack of coherence and of a joint identity did probably ultimately hurt their

performance, although in terms of the practical implications it also bears pointing out that even though they probably would have performed better in terms of their aggregated support if they had run separately, they would not have done any better in the single-member constituencies, in fact they would have likely lost even some of the 18 districts they ultimately managed to win.

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## AN OUTSPOKEN BUT GAFFE-PRONE CANDIDATE

Nor did Péter Márki-Zay deliver what was most fervently expected of him, namely a surge in the rural support of the opposition, which would have included many Jobbik voters. The promise of Márki-Zay was always that as a conservative Christian who said that ideologically he was closest to Jobbik among the opposition parties, he would appeal to conservative rural Hungary in a way that the urban-centred left-wing and centrist parties could never hope to. Alas, the candidate's outreach to conservatives was limited to the Buda districts in the capital, where he won big during the primaries and which the opposition completely swept for the first time ever on 3 April. In most other areas, Márki-Zay proved incapable of counterbalancing the strong popular trend towards Fidesz. Márki-Zay's candour was a major source of his appeal, but it was also a part of his undoing. His controversial statements provided excellent fodder for the pro-Fidesz propaganda machine, which amplified each controversial gaffe with great effectiveness.

In addition to Márki-Zay, the opposition campaign on the whole was also flawed. The first problem was that the participating parties failed to set up a joint campaign centre already before the primaries. A jointly operated campaign that was launched at the earliest possible moment could have improved the coordination between them and, vitally, it could also have exploited the favourable momentum for the opposition generated by the primaries to immediately campaign for the eventual victor. Instead, the opposition campaign came to standstill for several weeks after the primaries. The critical time lost back then played a major role in allowing Fidesz to take back control of the public agenda at the end of last year. In a close election, this mistake might have been enough to tilt the race – but this election was nowhere near close, and the reasons lie deeper than an ill-coordinated campaign.

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## THE SYSTEM THAT ORBÁN BUILT

Despite Márki-Zay's very real flaws it must also be pointed out that given the overall campaign dynamics it seems retrospectively that any candidate leading the opposition in this election was a sacrificial lamb. Whether they are aware of it or not, Márki-Zay's erstwhile rivals in the primary campaign can thank their lucky stars that it was not them. The war and its reverberations in the economy were

unforeseeable assets for Fidesz – or rather disadvantages that the Fidesz propaganda machine astutely turned into advantages. Fidesz has enclosed large segments of the electorate in a fortress that is blocked from critical information about the government and its activities. As we saw during the campaign, the propaganda machine was not only suitable for shielding voters from unfavourable information about Fidesz, it was even more vital in smearing the opposition, which it relentlessly did.

Now that electoral coordination, a necessary but not sufficient condition for a victory in this election system, has failed to deliver on its promise, the key question facing the opposition is how they will operate in a political system that a growing number of analysts and opposition politicians acknowledge to be an authoritarian regime which represses opinions and figures that challenge the government. A better and more effective campaign, more appealing policies, narratives and candidates, a more united front, etc. – these would be the most effective responses of an opposition under conditions of democracy. In a modern authoritarian regime, with seeming liberties but real and effective repression and propaganda, the challenge seems far more complex.

## TOUGH TIMES AHEAD

Despite its fourth election success in a row, it is safe to say that the Orbán government cannot expect a honeymoon period. A huge budget hole created by its own measures now awaits it in the coming period, double-digit inflation is in sight, and European Union funds are not flowing to Hungary because of concerns about corruption and the rule of law. The Orbán government is already expecting a significant slowdown in the economy as a result of the war in Ukraine, and the public's perception of the economy is likely to sour if temporary price-capping measures are rolled back.

The next Orbán government will also have to deal with Hungary's place in the world. Its trademark "Eastern Opening" policy has become a failure, and as its deteriorating relations with its most important ally, the Polish government, show that if Orbán does not change his stance on Russia, it will be difficult to recover. It seems that his reputation could suffer lasting damage from how his government has approached the war in Ukraine. All in all, the state of the economy and foreign policy make it likely that in spite of another big victory, this will be a difficult term for the Orbán government.

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