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Reasons for the Failure of the Opposition Coalition in the 2022 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections: Contemporary Party Politics and Pre-Electoral Coalitions

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ABSTRACT

Almost one and a half years before the Hungarian National Assembly Elections scheduled for April 2022, six opposition parties announced the establishment of the pre-electoral coalition "United for Hungary." Due to promising public opinion polls and the cumulative results of these parties in the 2018 parliamentary elections, which accounted for around 46%, the opposition hoped that the coalition would provide a strong challenge to the long-standing Fidesz government, which had been in power since 2010. However, the opposition's performance significantly worsened (34.4%) compared to the previous elections and fell well below the predictions of opinion polls. This research aims to unravel this puzzle and answer the research question: "Why did the opposition coalition fail to win the 2022 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections?" To answer this question, 14 face-to-face interviews were conducted with the leaders of the coalition parties, the opposition's Prime Minister candidate, local journalists, analysts, and international observers. The research primarily focuses on the perspective of the opposition parties themselves regarding the main factors that contributed to their defeat. The analysis of the interviews revealed several commonly mentioned reasons for the defeat, which have been categorized into three groups: (1) the Opposition's Mistakes or Weaknesses, (2) the Strengths of Fidesz, and (3) Independent Factors. Among all the reasons in these groups, the three most influential factors turned out to be the weaknesses in the opposition's communication and campaign, an ineffective prime ministerial candidate, and the unlimited resources of Fidesz.

Key words: pre-electoral coalitions, party politics, Hungary, parliamentary elections

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| ABSTRACT | 4 |
| INTRODUCTION | 6 |
| LITERATURE REVIEW | 8 |
| OVERVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL CASE | 15 |
| HUNGARIAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE | 15 |
| OPPOSITION IN THE 2022 NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS..... | 17 |
| RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY | 21 |
| RESEARCH DESIGN..... | 21 |
| CONCEPTUALISATION..... | 22 |
| OPERATIONALISATION AND RESEARCH METHODS | 22 |
| ANALYSIS | 25 |
| OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS | 25 |
| OPPOSITION MISTAKES AND WEAKNESSES | 27 |
| <i>Campaign and Communication</i> | 27 |
| <i>Fragmentation and Polarisation</i> | 31 |
| <i>Self-ignorance of the Opposition</i> | 35 |
| <i>Candidates and Primaries</i> | 37 |
| FIDESZ STRENGTHS | 39 |
| <i>Resources: Finances, Media and Administrative Power</i> | 39 |
| <i>Fidesz Campaign Messages</i> | 43 |
| INDEPENDENT FACTORS..... | 44 |
| <i>Opposition Prime Minister Candidate</i> | 44 |
| <i>War</i> | 48 |
| CONCLUSION | 50 |
| APPENDIX | 53 |
| LIST OF RESPONDENTS | 53 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 54 |

INTRODUCTION

The 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape, witnessing the formation of an unprecedented opposition coalition “United for Hungary” (“Egységben Magyarországért”) consisting of six ideologically diverse political parties. The emergence of this coalition raised hopes for a strong challenge to the incumbent government led by Fidesz, which had maintained a firm grip on power for three consecutive terms. However, despite high expectations and a united front, the opposition coalition faced a staggering defeat, failing to secure victory in the election. What is more, despite almost identical turnout in 2022 National Elections, overall result of the opposition (34.4%) (National Election Commission, 2022) was significantly worsened compared to the 2018 one (Statista, 2018) where opposition parties independently secured 46.5% in total.

This research delves into the intricacies surrounding the reasons behind the opposition coalition's setback, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contributed to their failure to attain electoral success. By examining the perspectives of the opposition parties and their leaders, and also some other political actors such as journalists, analysts, international organisations, this study endeavours to shed light on the underlying challenges, missteps, and obstacles that thwarted their ambitions. Therefore, the central research question guiding this study is the following: **"Why did the opposition coalition fail to win the 2022 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections?"**.

As for the research problem: the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections presented a unique scenario with the formation of an unprecedented opposition coalition in the recent years in Hungary, uniting disparate parties in their endeavour to unseat the long-standing ruling government. This coalition seemed to offer a hope for those seeking change, yet its failure to secure victory raised pertinent questions about the dynamics of the political landscape in Hungary. The research problem at the heart of this study lies in understanding the specific reasons that contributed to the opposition coalition's defeat, despite its diverse representation and the expectations of a competitive challenge. By exploring the perspectives of the opposition parties and their leaders, I seek to identify the internal and external challenges they faced, the strategies employed during the campaign, and the influence of broader societal and political trends that played a role in shaping the electoral outcome.

The literature on political coalitions, that is analysed in more detail below, has primarily centred around the study of governmental coalitions or the motivations behind parties forming pre-electoral alliances. While extensive research has examined the strategies and determinants leading to the creation of such pre-electoral coalitions, there remains a significant gap in the understanding of the factors influencing the electoral outcome of these coalitions. Specifically, little attention has been devoted to investigating why certain pre-electoral coalitions fail to achieve their intended goals during the electoral process, despite uniting a few parties with diverse ideologies, objectives, and target audiences. Understanding the reasons for the failure of pre-electoral coalitions is of paramount importance for comprehending the complexities of multiparty electoral systems and the dynamics of political alliances. Addressing this gap in the literature will provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by opposition coalitions in their bid for electoral success and shed light on the internal and external factors that shape the electoral fate of such alliances. By analysing the reasons behind the defeat of the opposition coalition in the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, this research seeks to contribute crucial knowledge to this underexplored area. This research holds significant implications for understanding the intricacies of electoral politics in Hungary and beyond. It offers valuable insights into the factors that influenced the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, shedding light on the complexities of forming and sustaining opposition coalitions in diverse political landscapes. Moreover, the study's findings can provide valuable lessons for opposition parties and political strategists, enabling them to learn from the experiences of the 2022 elections and make more informed decisions in future campaigns. Additionally, it contributes to the academic discourse on comparative politics and electoral studies, offering a nuanced analysis of the dynamics that shape electoral outcomes in multiparty systems.

To explore the reasons behind the opposition coalition's defeat, this research employs qualitative methods. Primary data is gathered through in-depth interviews with key members of the opposition parties and their leaders, providing valuable first-hand insights into their perspectives, strategies, and challenges during the election campaign. Furthermore, secondary data, including election results, public opinion polls, and media coverage, will be analysed to contextualize the electoral environment and identify broader trends that may have influenced the election outcome.

Below you will find the Literature Review which represents the theoretical framework for this study, the description of the Methodology used to conduct the research, Results/Discussion which presents and interprets the findings of the research, and the Conclusion summarizing the results of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the main focus of the literature on coalition formation has been the government coalitions, pre-electoral coalition (PEC) formation was also a subject of research for decades as the annual number of pre-electoral coalitions in Western Europe was raising (Golder, Pre-electoral coalitions in comparative perspective: A test of existing hypotheses, 2005).

One of the first cross-country research about the factors that influence the probability of pre-electoral coalition formation was conducted by Golder in 2005, where she examined “why do some parties coordinate their electoral strategies as part of a pre-electoral coalition, while others choose to compete independently at election time?”. In the scope of the research, she tested two hypotheses using the election examples from the 22 advanced industrialised countries between 1946-1998. The first hypothesis: “pre-electoral coalitions are more likely to form in disproportional systems if there are a sufficiently large number of parties” was supported by the research while the second one - “pre-electoral coalitions are more likely to form if voters face high uncertainty about the identity of future governments” – was not (Golder, 2005). Strom et al also claim that parties in disproportional electoral systems are forced to coalesce (Strom, Budge, & Laver, 1994). According to the hypothesis, coalition-making is the office-seeking behaviour of the parties as “electoral coalitions are formed as a means of overcoming some barrier of representation (647)” and the goal is to increase their number of seats and “the chances of being in government”. Also, the PECs are more likely to be successful in countries that have disproportional electoral systems and similar electoral rules (659). However, some authors claim that there is a lack of theoretical and empirical evidence that "strategic coordination can lead to widespread opposition success in single-round systems" (O'Dwyer & Stenberg, 2021).

Another reason why parties decide to join the coalitions and risk their separate identities is to give the incentive to the voters to vote for the small party which now has a bigger chance to reach the threshold hence their vote is not wasted. In 15 % of the cases studied in Golder's research, PECs managed to win the vote in Majoritarian systems (654), meaning it's not an exception for the coalitions to succeed even in majoritarian systems (2005). And 44% of the 292 elections that took place in parliamentary democracies between 1946-1998, had at least one pre-electoral coalition and around 25% of all governments formed during this period "were based on the pre-electoral agreements" (Goder, 2006).

The arguments developed by Toka and Popescu in their research are also interesting (Toka & Popescu, 2021). They argue that two-round electoral system, which was present in Hungary until 2011, kept the political spectrum more diverse and allowed parties to run independently. In contrast, the changes to the electoral system now force opposition parties to coordinate because, in single-member districts, elections are one-round, unlike the old 1990-2010 system when there were two rounds in case no candidate received 50% +1 of the votes. This allowed other opposition parties to support each other's candidates in the second round, while running independently in the first.

Despite the literature suggests that usually coalitions are formed to increase their chances, improve their previous results and to encourage voters by guaranteeing their vote is not wasted, the example of Hungary raises questions about the efficiency and possible counter-productivity of the pre-election coalitions. However, there still remains a chance for the coalition to lose the vote if they fail to "co-ordinate sufficiently" (Goder, 2006). In addition, ideological incompatibility in the policy preferences of the coalition parties might be another discouraging factor for their electorate to vote for the coalition (Goder, 2006) as the concessions made in order to agree on the common strategy, programme and messages, are "blamed on the party leadership" and the voters of the respective parties refuse to vote for the coalition (ibid). The literature also suggests that being a part of a pre-electoral coalition raises chances for the smaller parties to get to enter the Parliament (ibid), meaning their main motivation can be the latter, not winning the election. This happens because parties make decision whether to join a coalition or not, by comparing cost-benefit in either case and they do join if the possible benefits outweigh the costs, meaning they are more concentrated on their own success in the coalition than the coalition's success as a whole, leading to the failure of the latter. The election system itself also has a significant impact on the voter behaviour and turnout – while

proportional representation provides more incentives for citizens to vote and for parties to mobilize, non-proportional systems work quite the contrary as they “disadvantage smaller parties” (Tillman, 2015).

Despite all the factors that might have a negative effect on the coalition’s performance in the elections, as a general knowledge, literature claims that “the parties that form a pre-electoral coalition can attract more votes than would otherwise be the case” (Goder, 2006). Based on the analysis of 223 national legislative elections in 19 countries between 1970-2002, Tillman argues that “the presence of a pre-electoral coalition increases voter turnout [by more than 1.5 percentage points] by reducing uncertainty about the possible government that will form after the election” (Tillman, 2015). At the same time, he notes that voter participation is also depended on the “electoral context and strategic party behaviour”.

Some aspects of pre-electoral coalitions are also studied in non-democratic regimes. Gandhi and Reuter attempted to distinguish between the incentives for coalition formation in non-democracies and democracies (Gandhi & Reuter, 2013). Based on the analysis of 413 non-democratic legislative elections between 1946 and 2006, the authors claim that while the institutional factors, such as electoral rules and social cleavages lead the opposition to coordinate in democratic regimes, they have a marginal effect on the opposition decision-making in authoritarian election and electoral repression and stability of parties shape the rise of pre-electoral coalitions. Although the idea of establishing an electoral coalition in general is the same: “to coordinate their efforts so that they do not make it easier for the incumbent to win re-election by defeating each other” (Gandhi & Reuter, 2013), the opposition has more challenging task under authoritarianism: first to attract the votes and second, to somehow make sure the incumbent is ready to step down from power in case of the defeat. It is also worth mentioning that studying opposition behaviour and pre-electoral coalitions under authoritarianism gained more relevance since 1990s as the proportion of multi-party elections, hence the number of “electoral authoritarian”/“competitive authoritarian” regimes rose compared to single-party elections (ibid, Fig.1). Simultaneously, the share of opposition coalitions started rising in the 90s and among the world regions, Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Union held the most elections with opposition coalitions running. Overall, non-level playing field and the tactics of the incumbent to divide the opposition is identified as one of the most important factors preventing them from entering the coalitions; and the uniqueness of the coalitions under authoritarianism is that might involve “parties that have reasons to mistrust

each other”. Also, the probability of the coalition formation rises if the number of previous elections, in which the largest opposition party competed, is high, meaning this party has earned enough reputation to build a coalition around itself.

Some of the non-conventional explanations of pre-electoral coalition formation can be found with Hendrawan et al (Hendrawan, Berenschot, & Aspinall, 2021) who portray the coalition partners as pay-off seekers and mainly focus on the patronage democracies with a case of Indonesia’s regional elections, where the pay-off mainly means the cash payments from candidates “in exchange for nomination”. The authors define the patronage democracy as “a democracy in which material benefits are routinely exchanged for political support”. In such cases, ideological factors and the chances for a candidate to win are widely neglected and coalition-building is monetized, as proven by the comparison of the wealth of the selected common candidates and their poor chances of winning.

Classic theories of coalition-building (Cox, 1997) claim that “parties with similar ideological backgrounds should be more likely to form a coalition government”, and for selecting pre-electoral coalition partners they use a similar logic of choosing neighbours from the left-right continuum (Debus, 2009). Among the traditional theories of coalition building is an above-mentioned disproportionality hypothesis, which suggests that disproportional electoral systems increase the likelihood of pre-electoral coalition formation (Shepsle & Bonchek, 1997). Similar idea is elaborated with Strom et al who argue that “systems not based on proportional representation lists tend to force parties to coalesce before elections in order to exploit electoral economies of scale. The more disproportional the electoral system, the greater the incentives for pre-electoral alliances” (Strom, Budge, & Laver, 1994). “Electoral coalitions are formed as a means of overcoming some barrier of representation” (Golder, 2005). Bertoa and Enyedi argue that one of the reasons that facilitate coalition formation is the lack of polarisation, meaning the “ideological distance between parties” (Bertoa & Enyedi, 2011). The authors refer to pre-electoral coalitions as blocs and claim that from 1990-2009 the relevance of blocs was very high in Hungarian party system due to the very low level of fragmentation and despite the very high level of polarisation. Other theories claim that likelihood of opposition coordination increases if there is “a real programmatic policy divide between the incumbent regime and the opposition” (Wahman, 2012), meaning that coalitions are set up as the visions of the opposition and the government regarding the future development of the country diverge dramatically.

On another note, the literature on the performance and results of the pre-electoral coalitions, is rather limited. In her comprehensive study “Why Elections Fail”, Pippa Norris identifies four main reasons which undermine the elections, hence negatively affects the performance of opposition parties, including structural constraints, international forces, institutional checks and electoral management issues (Norris, 2015). Specifically, some of the flaws that lead to opposition boycotts, public protest and violence in some cases, include disqualification of opponents, gerrymandering of district boundaries, uneven playing field for parties, shrunk space for independent media, falsified vote count, misuse of state resources, vote-buying, casting more than one ballot from a citizen, and biased courts. Based on New Zealand case, Jack Vowles examined whether voters prefer coalitions or single party governments. The article does not study the pre-election coalitions explicitly; however, we can assume that voter preference for government type also affects the voter behaviour on deciding to vote for either the pre-election coalition or a single party. According to Vowles, voters choose between coalition or single party based on rationality argument or norms. In rationality-based decision, small party voters prefer coalitions, while large party voters with strong identification prefer single-party government (Vowles, 2011). As for the norms, politically left voters usually prefer coalitions, while the right prefer single-party governments(ibid).

Part of the literature also covers the factors that affect voter turnout; however, the topic is mainly studied in the US context (Jackson, 1996) (Gerber & Green, 2016) (Sinclair, McConnell, & Michelson, 2013). Jackson found campaign factors as one of the most important in explaining the voter turnout while Gerber and Green conclude that face-to-face canvassing increases turnout by 8% points, and sending a mail to potential voters increases the subject's turnout rate by about 0.5% point, while the “messages that exert social pressure are substantially more effective than the typical non-partisan get-out-the-vote message”. However, it should be noted that variation in conditions might also affect the differences in message effectiveness (Gerber & Green, 2016). Furthermore, phone calls showed no increase in turnout. The effectiveness of grassroots activities for voter mobilization is studied with Sinclair et al, concluding that face-to-face meetings with voters by canvassers living in a voter's local neighbourhood is more effective against the canvassers from other neighbourhoods (Sinclair, McConnell, & Michelson, 2013). Another set of literature overview the voter mobilization tactics in non-democratic regimes. Based on Russia's example, Frye et al find that employees being “forced” by the employers to vote for the regime is one of the main factors in modern autocracies to increase the voter turnout and win elections (Frye, Reuter, & Szakonyi, 2014).

The literature also discusses the conditions for the success of political parties, not necessarily the pre-electoral coalitions. However, such discussions might be of interest to this study, as pre-electoral coalitions are also expected to act as a single electoral unit. In this regard, Zuborova's research on the success of new political parties in Slovakia and the Czech Republic after 2010 lists interesting arguments in response to the question, "Why are new political parties electorally successful, able to break into parliament, and even become part of a coalition government?" The author argues that the key to the success of such parties is "the ability to promote 'old' ideas in a new fashion" (Zuborova, 2015). Some older studies divide parties into two general groups – mobilizing and challenging. Based on the analysis of Dutch Parliamentary election programs, they argue that political parties that focus on mobilisation tend to forge stronger connections with the electorate and typically have a longer-lasting presence in Parliament compared to challenging parties (Rochon, 1985). In this context, "Mobilizers" are the long-established political parties that focus on consolidating their support base through targeted communication, while "Challengers" are smaller and/or new political parties that challenge the status quo and offer a clear alternative to it (ibid).

The importance of political institutions in the success of new political parties is also studied by Willey, who uses the analysis of 18 post-WWII democracies. He argues that "Institutions affect the success of new parties in two ways. Through the psychological effect, institutions affect the number of votes a party will receive. Additionally, through the mechanical effect, institutions determine the proportionality of the translation of votes into seats" (Willey, 1998). The second part of this argument can be of great importance for this study due to the nature of the Hungarian electoral system where voters are given two ballots. Even if a party receives under 50% of the proportional votes, it has a chance to achieve a 2/3 supermajority because of the majoritarian votes from the districts. Based on the analysis of 233 political parties across 19 Western countries between 1960 and 1980, the success of new political parties is also argued to be related to the type of electoral system by Harmel and Robertson (Harmel & Robertson, 1985).

Another crucial aspect in the discussion surrounding the electoral success of political parties is the role of their resources. A novel approach has been developed by Sikk, in which he argues that the resources used to increase the visibility of a political entity also contribute significantly to convincing voters to support them. These resources encompass not only the financial assets and the membership of a party but also its leadership, organizational structure, and ideology.

(Sikk, 2006). The inclusion of the last points in this criterion is interesting due to the nature of our case study, the Hungarian opposition coalition, which had an ideologically incompatible leader, and the coalition parties themselves appeared not to agree on many issues.

Based on the literature review and the empirical case thoroughly examined below, it becomes evident that several critical conditions must be met to ensure the success of electoral units, including pre-electoral coalitions. Foremost among these conditions is the presentation of a viable alternative to the incumbent government, a paramount factor that must be not only effectively formulated but also adeptly communicated to the electorate. The careful selection coupled with the crafting of an effective messaging strategy, understanding one's own electorate, and precise targeting, assumes utmost significance in this context.

The second pivotal condition revolves around the actual unity existing within the pre-electoral coalition partners. It is imperative that these parties function as a cohesive and singular entity, rallying around a shared, overarching objective – the removal of the incumbent administration, while simultaneously proposing a concrete and attractive alternative. This representation of the coalition should, above all, be grounded in their ideological congruence and shared visions for the country's development. In the absence of such ideological alignment, the coalition's campaign behaviour is likely to diverge, and their common programme may be reduced to a mere semblance of consensus.

A third, equally crucial condition is the existence of a competitive political environment. In this setting, it is vital that media access, financial resources, and administrative capabilities are not disproportionately concentrated in the hands of the ruling party. When such disparities persist, the playing field remains inherently uneven, disadvantaging the pre-electoral coalition's chances of success. In essence, a fair and balanced political landscape is indispensable for ensuring that the coalition has a fair chance of securing victory. To sum up, the success of pre-electoral coalitions hinges on a multi-faceted interplay of factors, including the formulation and communication of a compelling alternative to the incumbent, the cohesiveness and ideological alignment of coalition partners, and the presence of a competitive political environment. Recognising and addressing these conditions is vital for any pre-electoral coalition aspiring to make a meaningful impact in the electoral arena.

OVERVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL CASE

Hungarian Political Landscape

After over 40 years of communist rule, spanning from the late 1980s into the early 1990s, Hungary stands out as a notable success story among the Post-Communist and Post-Soviet states, having managed a peaceful transition to democracy (Pinter, 2008). Hungary's transition was particularly remarkable, characterized by roundtable negotiations between the Hungarian Government and the opposition, ultimately leading to free elections in the country. These transformative changes empowered the Hungarian populace to freely elect their new governments in the following years. In a significant milestone in 2004, Hungary became a member of the European Union, cementing its substantial progress along the path of democratization. In the early 2000s, Hungary's status as a consolidated democracy was beyond doubt, marked by the absence of any revolutionary upheavals against democratic governance and a steadily improving economy (ibid).

The first government following the regime change in 1990 was a coalition consisting of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), the Independent Smallholders Party (FKgP), and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). This MDF-FKgP-KDNP coalition government was later succeeded by a Socialist government in 1994, composed of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). After each government served a single term, in 1998, the Fidesz party, under the leadership of Viktor Orban, assumed power in a coalition with FKgP and MDF. Their tenure, however, also lasted just one term before the Socialist party returned to power in 2002 and remained in office until 2010. During their two terms in government, Ferenc Gyurcsany, the leader of MSZP, held the position of Prime Minister from 2004 to 2009, marking the first instance of a Hungarian Prime Minister retaining office following a National Assembly Election since 1990.

Gyurcsany's leadership was marked by serious controversies, not only in light of the 2008 financial crisis but also for events preceding it. Several months before the onset of the 2008 crisis, Gyurcsany's government implemented austerity measures to address the high budget deficit. These measures drew sharp criticism from the public, experts, and the opposition, including Fidesz. Furthermore, a secret voice recording scandal emerged shortly after

Gyurcsany's reelection in 2006. The recording captured him speaking at the MSZP party congress, admitting to deceitful tactics employed to secure electoral victory. This revelation triggered mass protests, with demands for the Prime Minister's resignation. The protests escalated into violence, with law enforcement deploying rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons against the demonstrators (Deutsche Welle, 2006) (The Guardian, 2006). Consequently, Gyurcsany's popularity plummeted, making him one of Hungary's least favoured politicians even today. Following MSZP's electoral defeat in 2010, Gyurcsany severed ties with the party and went on to establish the Democratic Coalition (DK), which has since become the largest opposition party in Hungary.

The landscape of Hungarian politics underwent a dramatic transformation when Fidesz, under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orban, returned to power for their second term in 2010, securing a parliamentary supermajority. Remarkably, they managed to maintain their grip on power for four consecutive terms since then. In the initial two years of their rule, Fidesz initiated profound changes to Hungary's constitutional order. This included a comprehensive overhaul of electoral rules, a shift from the previous two-round system utilized between 1990 and 2010 to a single-round system. Additionally, they redrew the electoral districts, established a mandate for political parties to have individual candidates in over 70 constituencies in order to present a separate list, and extended voting rights to ethnic Hungarians across Central Europe. Over the course of these 13 years, Orban's government faced substantial international criticism for its democratic backsliding, limiting the media freedom, and treatment of minority rights. Presently, the government exercises full control over state media, while private or critical media outlets have either been shut or taken over by government-affiliated owners. This shift has resulted in more favourable coverage of the government and has effectively left no room for opposition parties to communicate effectively with the Hungarian population (OSCE/ODIHR, 2022). To underscore the severity of the situation, in 2021, Hungary's ranking on the World Press Freedom Index plummeted to 92, a harsh contrast to its 56th position in 2013 (RSF, 2021). Furthermore, key institutions in the country are now predominantly managed by individuals affiliated with Fidesz, including the chief prosecutor and the head of the media authority. This consolidation of power within the hands of Fidesz has had far-reaching implications for the political and media landscape in Hungary.

Given the circumstances favouring the ruling party, the opposition concluded that unification against the Fidesz government represented their sole opportunity to oust the incumbents.

Consequently, in late December 2020, the opposition parties jointly announced the establishment of the "United for Hungary" opposition coalition. This coalition, uniting under a single list and fielding joint individual candidates, was established to contest the 2022 Parliamentary elections.

Opposition in the 2022 National Assembly Elections

The United for Hungary opposition coalition was formed by the six opposition parties: the social democratic Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), the social liberal Democratic Coalition (DK), the conservative Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary), LMP – Hungary's Green Party, Dialogue for Hungary – The Greens' Party (Párbeszéd), and the liberal Momentum Movement. The parties agreed to run with a single list, to choose one candidate for Prime Minister through the primary elections and to select 106 common candidates for the constituencies who would run against the FIDESZ candidate in the National Elections in April 2022. The first round of primaries for selecting the joint opposition candidates took place in September 2021, marking a historic moment in Hungary's political history as it was the nation's first-ever national primary election of this kind. In this unique electoral process, the selection of individual constituency candidates followed the first-past-the-post voting principle, while the choice of the prime-ministerial candidate was intended to emerge from the three individuals who secured the most favorable results in the initial round.

Notably, Klara Dobrev of the Democratic Coalition (DK), Gergely Karacsony representing Dialogue (also the Mayor of Budapest), and Peter Marki-Zay, an independent candidate who serves as the Mayor of Hodmezovasarhely, emerged as the top contenders, garnering respective vote shares of 35%, 27%, and 20%. However, a pivotal development occurred in the aftermath of negotiations between the second and third runners. Gergely Karacsony made the strategic decision to withdraw his candidacy, thereby enabling Peter Marki-Zay to advance to the second round against Klara Dobrev. This shift in candidacies was allegedly linked to the surging popularity of Peter Marki-Zay, a trend substantiated by pre-second-round opinion polls. Simultaneously, this move was perceived as an effort to diminish Klara Dobrev's chances. It is noteworthy that Klara Dobrev is the wife of Ferenc Gyurcsany, the former Prime Minister of

Hungary, who led the Socialist government from 2004 to 2009. According to the polls, Peter Marki-Zay was seen as having a stronger electoral position against Klara Dobrev than Karacsony did (ATV, 2021). Consequently, other opposition parties made a decision to rally behind Marki-Zay in order to prevent the Democratic Coalition (DK) from becoming the unconditional leader of the coalition.

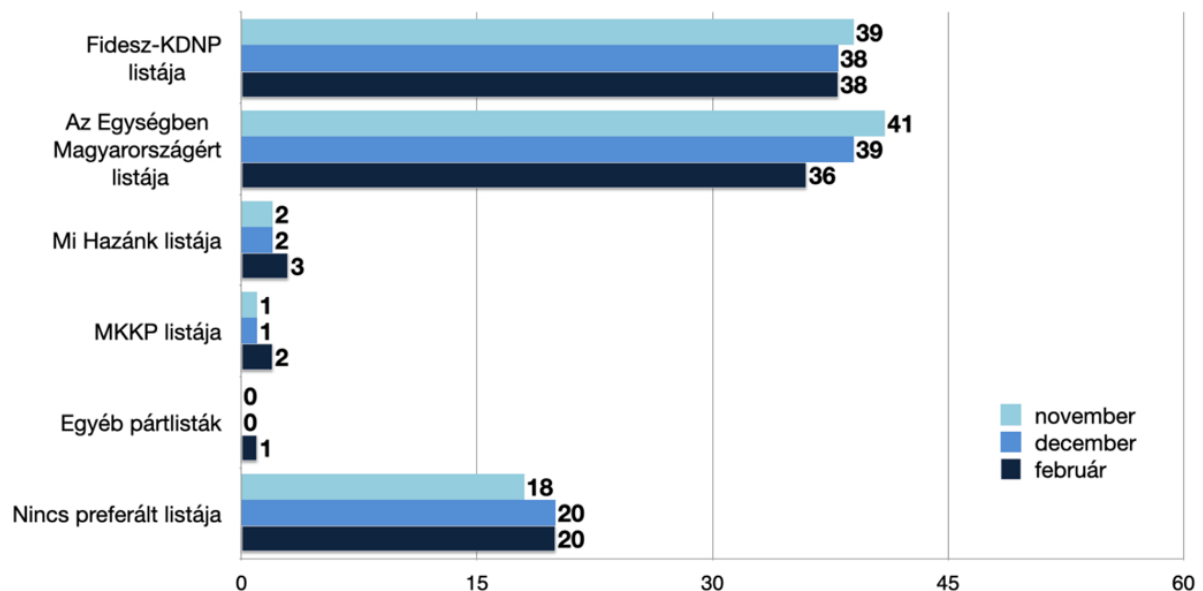
The second round to select the joint opposition candidate for the Prime Minister of Hungary took place in October 2021. The second round resulted in the victory of the non-partisan candidate, Peter Marki-Zay, who secured a 57% of the primary votes. Marki-Zay's emergence as the chosen candidate proved to be a surprising turn of events for many observers, primarily owing to his severe ideological differences from the remainder of the coalition. It's worth noting that the majority of the coalition parties within the opposition can be characterized as left-leaning, centrist, or centre-right on the ideological spectrum. Conversely, Marki-Zay openly identifies himself as a conservative, endorsing right-leaning economic views. This ideological divergence added an unexpected dimension to his selection as the candidate, highlighting some of the coalition parties' unwillingness to campaign for the DK Gyurcsany-affiliated candidate Klara Dobrev.

The formation of the coalition was not only marked by the incompatibility of its chosen leader but was also shrouded in controversy due to the pronounced ideological discrepancies and varied political histories among its constituent parties. A case in point was Jobbik, once a far-right party with perhaps the most conservative views within the coalition, particularly when opposed with parties of liberal or left leaning social tendencies such as Dialogue. In a parallel vein, the inception of the Momentum movement was rooted in opposition to the established political order, particularly targeting parties like MSZP, then the governing party, and DK, which had split from MSZP in 2011 and is presently led by former MSZP Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany. The contrast in political backgrounds and ideologies within the coalition was undeniable, adding the complexity and controversy to their joint venture. Despite these inherent controversies and tensions, the opposition pre-electoral coalition appeared promising, as indicated by several public opinion polls. Notably, from the moment the opposition coalition was unveiled in December 2020, it held a lead over Fidesz, according to some of the opinion polls (Publicus Research, 2021). The poll results turned around in a year, in the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 and Fidesz took the lead (Závecz Research, 2022), however, it did

not seem that the opposition was left with no chances and Fidesz had the victory secured; quite the contrary, the polls still showed that it would be a tight race (Idea, 2022).

According to some surveys, during 2021, the difference between the opposition and Fidesz results were marginal, with the opposition even holding a lead in certain periods, as indicated by some of these surveys. For instance, the Závecz Research survey consistently illustrated the leading position of the opposition coalition during the following months: November 2020, December 2020, and February 2021.

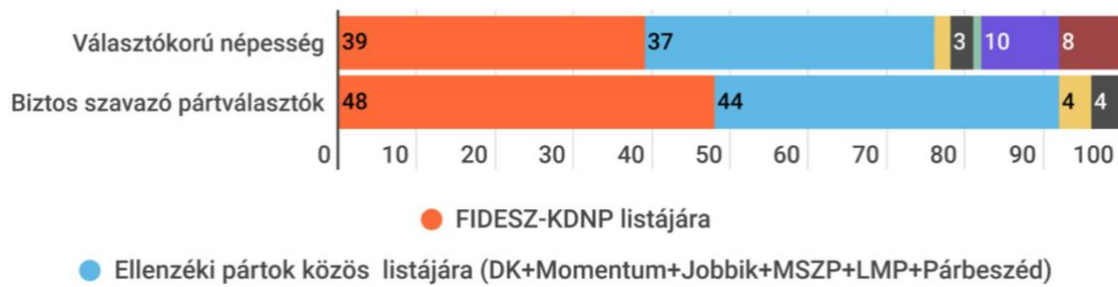
Figure 1: 2020-2021 December, February, and March opinion polls



Source: Zavecz Research: <https://24.hu/belfold/2022/02/14/zavecz-harom-szazalekponthoz-vezet-a-fidesz-az-ellenzerek-elott/>, retrieved on August 20, 2023

Even in the January 2022 polls, the race between the opposition and the ruling party appeared to be quite tight, notwithstanding the declining trend within the opposition's support base. According to IDEA's survey conducted at the outset of 2022, this dynamic was evident.

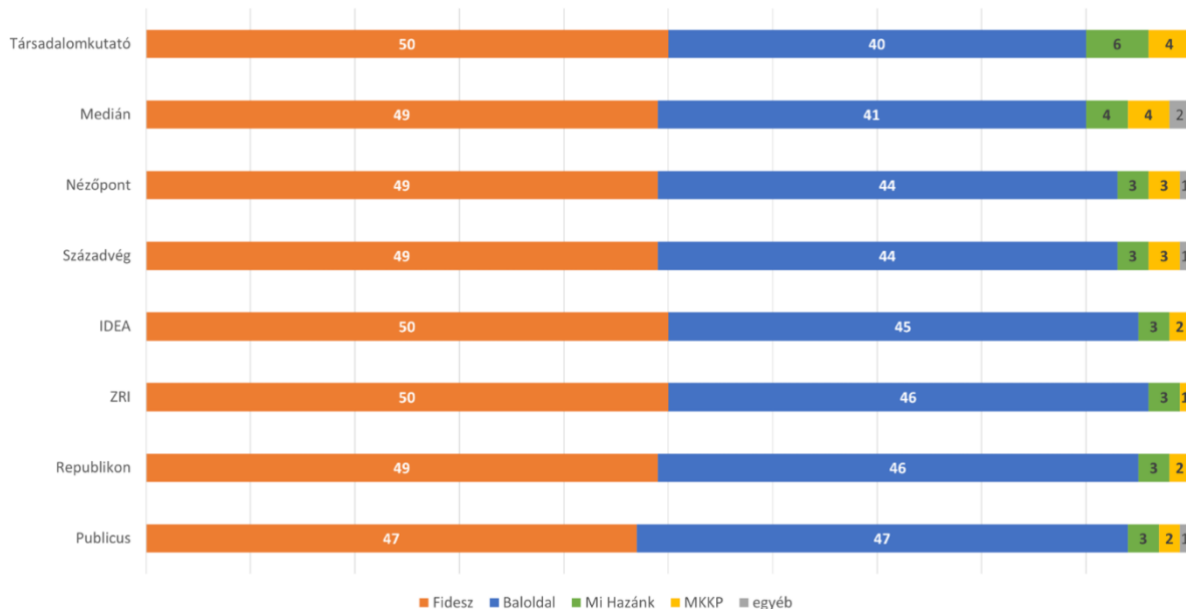
Figure 2: 2022 January opinion poll



Source: IDEA Intezet: <https://www.ideaintezet.hu/hu/hirek-aktualis/77/kismerteku--de-fontos-valtozasok-a-preferenciakban-----2022--januar> , retrieved on August 20, 2022

The chart presented below illustrates the opinion polls conducted closest to the election day. Out of the eight organizations that published the poll results, five of them forecasted that Fidesz would receive less than 50%, while six of these organizations predicted that the opposition would secure 44% or more of the vote.

Figure 3: The last opinion poll results before the election day in April 2022



Source: Közvélemény Kutatók: <https://kozvelemenykutatok.hu/#2> , retrieved on August 20, 2023.

With these polls and high expectations, along with their selected prime-ministerial and individual candidates, the opposition embarked on their electoral campaign against Fidesz. Despite the high hopes vested in the opposition and their collective performance in the

preceding 2018 parliamentary elections, the 2022 election results proved to be markedly disappointing, with the opposition receiving a mere 34.4% of the vote, thereby enabling Fidesz to secure yet another two-thirds majority. Given the exceptional nature of this electoral outcome and the prevailing global trend toward democratic backsliding, characterized by the shrinkage of civic and political spaces, I believe that delving into the root causes behind the opposition parties' failure to secure victory in such elections, particularly within the context of fragile democratic regimes, not only contributes to the literature on political coalitions but also offers a valuable analytical framework for countries facing similar challenges. The comprehensive research design outlining the scope and methodology of this research is elaborated in the subsequent sections.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The literature review highlights a research gap concerning the lack of academic understanding regarding the reasons behind the failure of pre-electoral coalitions. Existing literature has predominantly focused on coalition-formation processes, governmental coalitions, voter turnout, mobilization, and general election outcomes for parties, rather than specifically examining pre-electoral coalitions. To address this gap and achieve the research objectives, I will employ a single case study using a process-tracing design. Hungary has been selected as a suitable case to expand the literature on pre-election coalitions due to its unique situation of transitioning from democracy to a hybrid regime, therefore the impacts of the reverse transition to the chances and composition of pre-electoral coalitions will also be studied. Hungary's coalition itself presents an intriguing research puzzle, as the results were significantly worse than what would be expected based on the individual parties' independent performance. By closely examining opposition coordination and campaigning for the 2022 elections, this research seeks to uncover insights and answers to the research question.

Conceptualisation

A pre-electoral coalition can be conceptualized as a “collection of parties that do not compete independently in an election, either because they publicly agree to coordinate their campaigns, run joint candidates or joint lists, or enter government together following the elections” (Golder, *The Logic of Pre-electoral Coalition Formation*, 2006). “A pre-electoral coalition exists when multiple parties choose to co-ordinate their electoral strategies rather than run for office alone” (Goder, 2006). “The emergence of pre-electoral coalitions is the result of a bargaining process among party leaders who care about policy and office benefits”(ibid). Gandhi and Reuter define the term similarly: “Pre-electoral coalitions are agreements in which parties publicly announce that they will not compete independently in an election. Instead they coordinate their campaigns to sponsor joint candidates or lists or to not run against each other in some constituencies” (Gandhi & Reuter, 2013). Pre-election coalitions are established either to “signal the ability to form a government after the election” and to increase the information available for voters or to circumvent disproportionate voting rules” (Golder, 2006). Michael Wahman (2012) argues that coalitions are created either if opposition parties have a common policy agenda or they seek to get into office. At the same time, there can be a bunch of reasons why opposition parties often chose not to run in coalitions in electoral authoritarian regimes.

Operationalisation and Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the opposition's defeat. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex dynamics and perspectives surrounding the electoral outcome. Through semi-structured interviews with politicians from the opposition parties, including the opposition Prime Minister candidate Peter Marki-Zay, this research seeks to capture their insights and narratives regarding the election campaign and its outcome. This research mainly focuses on the perspectives of the opposition parties and their leaders. For this purpose, 14 face-to-face in-depth interviews have been conducted with opposition politicians, journalists, international organisations and analysts, and several indicators were observed during the interviews:

Motivations behind each party joining the coalition, elections program, promises featured on banners, reasons that the politicians name as the main factors hindering their success.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants for the interviews. The sample consists primarily of politicians from the opposition parties who were actively involved in the pre-election coalition – most of them running as the candidates in the constituencies, and some of them were just on the joint list. The selection aimed to ensure representation from different party affiliations and roles within the coalition. The final sample comprised 14 interviewees, including key figures within the opposition parties (representatives of 5 out of 6 parties were interviewed), a few political analysts, representatives of international organisations that observe politics in Hungary, journalists that were actively covering the news related to the 2022 elections, and a professor from a Hungarian university Political Science Department.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary method of data collection. The interviews allowed for a flexible and open-ended exploration of the participants' perspectives on the defeat of the opposition coalition. All interviews were conducted in person ensuring a comfortable and confidential environment for the participants. Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim for further analysis using the Microsoft Transcribe tool and the latter was double-checked manually by the author by listening to all recordings and fixing all errors found in the auto-transcribed files. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data. This approach involves the identification and interpretation of patterns, themes, and narratives within the data. The analysis was conducted using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to assist with data organization and retrieval. The data analysis process involved several iterative steps, including familiarization with the data, open coding, categorization of codes into themes, and interpretation of the findings. I tried to maintain reflexivity throughout the analysis, acknowledging my own biases and preconceptions.

This research adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the protection and well-being of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews, and their identities were anonymized during data transcription and reporting, if not given the consent of doing otherwise. It is worth mentioning that most of the participants signed their name to be revealed while being cited in the study. Confidentiality of the participants, who

requested their name not to be revealed, was maintained throughout the research process, and any potentially identifying information was carefully removed from the data.

On another note, I acknowledge the limitations that this study might have. The small sample size may restrict the volume of generalisation of the findings to the opposition coalitions worldwide. The reliance on self-reported perspectives from the opposition parties may introduce potential bias in the analysis. Additionally, the study focuses solely on the opposition's framing of the defeat, and a more comprehensive understanding could be achieved through incorporating other perspectives, such as voters. However, due to the financial and time limitations, quantitative research of the proper sample of voters couldn't be conducted. One minor concern is that while all my respondents spoke English, it is not their native language. Consequently, this factor may have hindered their ability to express themselves precisely as they intended. In a few instances, there is a possibility that this limitation affected their opinions. However, in such cases, their views will be interpreted in alignment with the expected ideas derived from other interviews, ensuring that the validity of the results remains intact. In addition, although the major part of the research will rely on the interviews conducted in English, some indicators that are to be used for measuring the variables are available only in Hungarian, for example the campaign banners and slogans. However, I will use online dictionary to translate those short messages and compared them to the data provided by the interviewees.

The findings from the data analysis will be reported in a comprehensive manner, presenting the main themes and narratives that emerged from the interviews. Rich quotes and excerpts from the interviews will be included to support the analysis and provide a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives. The paper will follow the conventions of academic reporting, including an introduction, literature review, methodology, results/discussion, and conclusion sections.

ANALYSIS

OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

“We did not lose because of the opposition’s mistakes, we lost because of Fidesz’ strengths” – that’s how the oppositions Prime Minister candidate Peter Marki-Zay explains the defeat of the opposition in the 2022 National elections. Although this passage partly reflects the reasoning of the defeat by the opposition politicians themselves, the list of possible reasons that they consider decisive is much more diverse.

As a result of the analysis of the 14 in-depth interviews with the Hungarian opposition politicians, journalists, analysts, and international organizations representatives, interesting trends emerged. Three core groups of reasons for the defeat of the opposition have been identified: The first is (1) the Opposition’s Mistakes or Weaknesses, the second is (2) the Strengths of Fidesz and the third is (3) Independent Factors that emerged beyond the first two groups. In the first category, Opposition Mistakes and Weaknesses, four different reasons were mentioned repeatedly by the respondents. The most frequently discussed issue was related to the errors in the opposition Campaign and Communication. This included the lack of a compelling alternative offered to voters during the campaign, wrong messaging, and ineffective targeting. The second most commonly discussed problem was the Fragmentation and Polarization of the opposition, which revealed both the technical nature of the coalition and the lack of genuine unity between the parties, leading to intra-party rivalry. The remaining reasons included Primaries and Candidates, who were not selected effectively as many respondents claimed, as well as the Self-ignorance of the Opposition of its own positions and capabilities.

Moving on to the second group, Fidesz Strengths, two main subcategories of reasons were determined: the first is the effective Messaging that influenced voters' decisions, and the second is the Resources of the ruling party, which includes Financial Resources, Power (captured state institutions and administrative resources), and Media. Administrative resources also encompass the Disproportional Election system, which was referred to as one of the factors favouring Fidesz in the 2022 elections. This system forced incompatible parties to coalesce, as according to the election law, a party needs to have candidates in 71 constituencies to be allowed to run with a separate list, making it virtually impossible for most opposition parties.

The "correct" Messaging primarily included anti-opposition narratives, framing the entire opposition as "puppets" of Ferenc Gyurcsany, allegedly the most unpopular politician in Hungary and the leader of the Democratic Coalition (DK) party. The second part of the Messaging factor partly overlapped with one of the independent factors, the Russia-Ukraine War, which became a major campaigning topic for Fidesz after the outbreak of the war. Fidesz portrayed itself as the protector from the war and blamed the opposition for supporting it and being willing to send Hungarians to Ukraine. As evident from these aspects, Fidesz's messaging mainly revolved around contrasting the unstable future prospects in case of the opposition's victory with the secure and stable future prospects of remaining in power.

The third set of reasons falls under the Independent Factors category. Although it can be debated whether they are entirely independent or overlap with other reasons, I believe certain features and importance of these factors need to be highlighted and separated from the other two groups. Two main reasons repeatedly mentioned by the respondents were grouped in this category, ordered from the most important to the least important factors: Opposition Prime Minister Candidate and Ukraine-Russia War. The PM Candidate factor mainly revolves around the character and political orientation of Peter-Marki Zay, who identifies himself as a conservative politician with a strong focus on family values and right-wing economic ideas, while the opposition coalition that he led is mainly left-leaning. The opposition politicians who were part of the coalition blamed his character, lack of experience, and messaging for the defeat of the opposition. As for the war factor, as mentioned earlier, it can be partially overlapped with the Fidesz Messages, particularly during the last four weeks of the election campaign. However, since messaging also involved other issues, these two factors are separated in the analysis.

Considering all the categories discussed, the most important reasons, measured by the number of respondents who mentioned them as decisive factors for the fate of the elections, are distributed across all three groups. The first most important reason appears to be the problems in the opposition's Campaign and Communication. The second reason, assessed as problematic by the opposition and independent actors alike, was the opposition's Prime Minister candidate, Peter Marki-Zay. Finally, the third most important factor from the respondents' perspective turned out to be Fidesz's Messages and Anti-Opposition Campaign. In conclusion, the analysis of the findings sheds light on the complex interplay of factors that contributed to the opposition's defeat in the 2022 national elections. It is evident that a combination of opposition

mistakes, Fidesz's strengths, and independent factors played significant roles in shaping the election outcome. Each reason and the supportive statements from the interviews are discussed in detail below to provide insight into the opposition's and independent actors' understanding and framing of the main reasons for their defeat.

OPPOSITION MISTAKES AND WEAKNESSES

Campaign and Communication

The analysis reveals that the respondents, including most of the opposition politicians, try to find the main mistakes in their own campaign and identify the weaknesses that favoured Fidesz's success in the 2022 National Elections. However, the scale of blame on the opposition as the main factor for their defeat varies from one party to another, and from external actors to the politicians. Nevertheless, the most frequently referred reason for their defeat lies in this category and entails several aspects.

On the one hand, the opposition had a positive agenda that should have been the main motivator for the voters to support the coalition. It included the program, main messages, and promises of the opposition. However, as Jobbik party member Patrik Schwarcz-Kiefer noted during the interview, “the biggest problem in the campaign is that there was no main message” (Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). It seems that most of the interviewees agree with him, including the member of the Socialist Party, Attila Mesterhazy, who argued that “if you ask me what was the opposition's 3-word message, I could not tell you a thing that has a meaning, that is value-based, and that resonates with your feelings” (Mesterhazy, 2022). Democratic Coalition (DK) party member Lajos Olah also reflected on the campaign experience with a similar approach: “When you look back and you want to collect the three main key messages, you cannot because there were 200 messages” (Olah, 2022).

Even among these “200 messages,” the main ones were negative, anti-Orban, and anti-Fidesz, not offering a tangible alternative to the incumbent. Gabor Harangozo, a member of the Socialist Party, pointed out that this approach was not helpful for the opposition to win votes:

“we cannot have a campaign just against Orban, but we need to work for the support of the citizens. If you want to win, it's not enough to campaign against Orban” (Harangozo, 2022). According to him, the opposition presented their program only two or three weeks before the election day, and this program was significantly diminished due to the significant differences between the policy ideas of the opposition. Member of the Momentum party agrees with his colleagues: “Another huge reason why I believe we lost is that the opposition didn't bring any alternatives. The way the opposition parties work here is that they say that the government steals and it's bad, that's it, and they don't have any agenda. They don't set the agenda, they don't have their own narrative” (Gelencser, 2023). Non-partisan respondents, such as policy analyst Andras Biro-Nagy, also echoed similar sentiments, stating that it wasn't clear to the people what the opposition was offering to the country. Their only promise was to “kick Orban out of power,” and their main focus was on being Anti-Orban, with the aim of changing the government (Biro-Nagy, 2022). This sentiment was also shared by local journalists, who mentioned that the opposition "didn't offer anything, just 'We hate Orban' - that was their only message which was really not enough," while not having a clear idea about what they would do the next day in case of their victory (Respondent 5, 2022). Levente Szadai also agreed with his colleague, arguing that “Everything was reduced to this question of Orban or not Orban” (Szadai, 2022), without offering a clear alternative to the incumbent.

On the other hand, unlike the majority of interviewees for this research, Prime Minister candidate Peter Marki-Zay emphasized in the interview that in order for the opposition to have any chance against Fidesz, it should have created the two-sided choice on the ballot “Fidesz and not Fidesz,” and the opposition pretty much achieved this goal by coalescing six parties (Marki-Zay, 2023). Obviously, it was the technical purpose of the coalition, but as it seems from other respondents' answers, this two-sided option became the main line of the opposition campaign and the only common ground for the opposition.

Apart from not having clear positive messages, respondents claim that there were many “bad messages” or ones targeted at only educated voters. According to Marki-Zay's former campaign team member, “the opposition focused too much on its core constituents, educated with the best people, and didn't have enough focus on undecided people, on countryside people. This is a huge mistake. And it was reflected in messages and their language, on billboards, on Facebook advertisements, on everything, on every activity of the campaign” (Rona, 2023). The opposition's campaign messages faced significant challenges in effectively resonating with the

majority of the population. These messages were perceived as being targeted towards a narrow group of highly-educated people and elites, making them less accessible and understandable to the broader electorate. For instance, the billboards with simplistic slogans like "Ministry for Healthcare!" or "Ministry for Education!" failed to connect with a vast majority of the Hungarian population, as evidenced by Patrik Schwarcz-Kiefer's statement that "90% of the Hungarian population don't even know how many ministries we have and if we have a healthcare ministry or not" (Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). This highlights the crucial importance of crafting messages that are relatable to everyday concerns and worries of ordinary citizens. Ferenc Gelencser of Momentum also pointed out a crucial flaw in the opposition's communication strategy, stating that they often focused on topics that appealed only to a certain group of people, roughly 7% of the population. Winning an election requires broader appeal, as Gelencser rightly stressed, "You cannot win with 7% of the population, you need 50% + 1" (Gelencser, 2023). To gain widespread support, the opposition should have addressed issues that resonate with a larger segment of the electorate.

The failure to connect abstract issues like democracy and the rule of law to the daily lives of the people seems to be critical weakness in the opposition's communication. Levente Szadai emphasized this, asserting that it was a crucial factor contributing to their defeat (Szadai, 2022). To build a stronger democracy, the opposition needed to make these issues relevant to people's daily struggles and demonstrate how they directly affect their lives. This approach would have likely garnered more support from voters who prioritize practical concerns over abstract concepts. Bence Tordai, a founding member of the Dialogue party, acknowledged that the opposition's focus on corruption was not entirely relevant to the concerns of Hungarian society. Tordai argued that the campaign should have prioritized addressing social inequalities and everyday problems faced by ordinary people, such as issues in the healthcare system, schools, and dealing with the state administration (Tordai, 2022). A campaign centred around such issues would have likely resonated more deeply with a broader cross-section of the population, allowing the opposition to build a stronger support base. The example provided by the Jobbik member highlights the importance of effective communication in garnering voter support. Failing to communicate in a way that aligns with the desires and preferences of the electorate can significantly hinder a party's electoral success. The need to bridge the gap between communication styles and voters' preferences is evident in the example cited, where the conservative ideas that were more familiar and acceptable to the Hungarian population were overlooked in favour of emphasizing less relevant issues, such as LGBTQ issues. University

Professor Sandor Gallai's analysis also emphasizes the significance of appealing to the majority of the electorate. He argues that focusing on progressive left-leaning issues, such as LGBTQ and migration-related topics, might not be beneficial from an electoral utilitarian perspective. Representing minority views strongly can alienate a larger portion of the electorate and limit a party's chances of electoral success (Gallai, 2022). Thus, the opposition's campaign should have taken a more pragmatic approach to align its messaging with the values of a broader segment of the population.

Prime Minister candidate Peter Marki-Zay highlighted some of the main messages of the opposition, including promises of a tax-free minimum wage, introduction of the Euro as the main currency in Hungary, publication of the communist agents list, and joining the European Public Prosecutors Office to prosecute wrongdoers, particularly those from the Fidesz party (Marki-Zay, 2023). However, non-partisan participants in this research, such as policy analyst Andras Biro-Nagy, criticized the opposition's focus on corruption and restoring democracy, stating that Hungarian voters tend to prioritize material concerns like salaries and cost of living: “They should have done a better campaign. They should have united their forces earlier. They should have started the campaign earlier. They should have done everything differently” (Biro-Nagy, 2022). Respondent 5 echoed this sentiment, expressing the need for a more effective campaign strategy, early unity among opposition parties, and innovative approaches. It appears that some respondents believe the opposition lacked resourcefulness and failed to fully utilize the available opportunities during the campaign (Respondent 5).

Another significant issue in the opposition's communication was their defensive approach, which hampered their ability to effectively counter Fidesz's campaign strategies. Bence Tordai from the Dialogue party admitted that the opposition should have adopted a more positive stance rather than constantly reacting to Fidesz's actions. He emphasized the importance of communicating their vision and strengths more proactively (Tordai, 2022). Similarly, Momentum member Gelencser commented on the opposition's reactive communication style, always responding to the government's moves rather than setting their own agenda (Gelencser, 2023). Respondent 9, representing an international organization, also highlighted the defensive nature of the opposition's campaign, contrasting it with Fidesz's offensive approach: “people saw Fidesz launching an offensive campaign while the opposition was always defending themselves”. When speaking about the main messages, even the PM candidate mentioned that one of the things that they were campaigning about was “that we would not take anybody to

war” (Marki-Zay, 2023), however this remark was not made in the context of mistakes but rather as a fact, a usual part of the campaign.

Regarding technical organization, the respondents identified various errors in communication. They emphasized the significance of the time gap between the post-primaries period and the start of the campaign, which resulted in lost opportunities for effective mobilization. Additionally, the lack of experience among campaign staff and inefficiencies in their activities drew criticism from non-partisan participants like University Professor Sandor Gallai: “I could not meet the campaign staff. I couldn't see them standing at major junctions or undergrounds. They were not doing their jobs” (Gallai, 2022). Bence Tordai and Atilla Mesterhazy emphasized the detrimental impact of a two-to-three-month delay in the campaign, which compromised the professionalism of the opposition's efforts: “we made a really bad campaign, not just on strategic level, but also, at the operation level. So, we had two-or-three-months delay in the campaign and it was not really professional at the national level” (Tordai, 2022).

In conclusion, all respondents, including the opposition politicians as well as non-partisan actors such as journalists, analysts and independent organisations consider the communication and campaign issue as one of the main reasons for the defeat of the opposition in the 2022 National Elections in Hungary. These shortcomings include the lack of a clear and compelling main message, narrow targeting of messages, inability to connect with the daily concerns of the people, defensive communication, and organizational issues. The frequency with which these factors were cited by respondents highlights their perceived significance in the opposition's defeat.

Fragmentation and Polarisation

Fragmentation and polarisation within the opposition emerged as a significant and frequently mentioned factor contributing to their defeat, as highlighted by the respondents. The coalition, though formed technically, lacked genuine unity and faced a substantial ideological divide among its members. Intra-party and personal rivalries further exacerbated the disunity, exemplified by the lack of enthusiasm displayed by the Democratic Coalition following Klara Dobrev's defeat in the PM primaries. The opposition acknowledged that the pronounced

differences and divisions between parties resulted in the automatic loss of some of their voters when the coalition was announced. As one respondent stated, "Momentum started its politics against Democratic Coalition, and now, we have to go together against Fidesz. So, it wasn't easy. When we started our campaign, we had already lost a significant part of our voters because of this coalition... because some of our voters don't like if we make a coalition with this and that party" (Olah, 2022).

While the only common ground among the opposition was the shared sentiment of opposing Orban and Fidesz, beyond that, it appeared that the coalition subjects were vastly different from one another. During the campaign, some parties positioned themselves in a hostile manner, openly discussing their disagreements, intra-party disputes, and issues of mistrust. A prime example of this antagonistic dynamic was evident in a televised debate, where Klara Dobrev openly criticized Peter Marki-Zay, questioning his suitability for the Prime Minister's role: "Dobrev Klara said [to Marki-Zay] openly in a broadcasted television debate that you are not a good candidate because you have no talent, you don't have the necessary character for becoming the Prime Minister", while Marki-Zay retaliated by casting doubt on Dobrev's ability to distance herself from her husband's legacy (Gallai, 2023). Moreover, Marki-Zay accused some former coalition members of dishonesty during the campaign, alleging that they were influenced and unwilling to genuinely pursue victory. He pointed to the involvement of secret services and instances of blackmail by Fidesz as contributing factors to their defeat: "I'm outraged that some of these parties never even wanted to win. Sure they are traitors. They're influenced. I can tell you so many details you know, when we could see what Fidesz is doing in the background with secret services, blackmailing, etc" (Marki-Zay, 2023).

Aside from the open debate about their disagreements, it became evident that some parties were not fully committed to dedicating their time and resources to the coalition's success. Respondents noted instances where parties declined to support candidates from other coalition members in certain districts or were not equally proactive in campaigning and energizing their activists. This uneven commitment within the coalition created a less cohesive and less effective campaign effort. One respondent remarked, "It was pretty clear that not all the political parties were putting in resources with the same willingness to energize their activists, to campaign that intensely everywhere" (Biro-Nagy, 2022). Another respondent pointed out that in most of the constituencies, candidates had the support of only their own party activists, while other parties' activists refrained from supporting them (Harangozo, 2022). The lack of

collaboration and unified effort was further evident in the perception that some parties were not fully invested in the campaign. Marki-Zay accused DK and Jobbik of not actively participating in the campaign, refraining from sharing messages on social media, and being reluctant to contribute financially. He expressed frustration over their lack of support and revealed that DK was pressured by the other parties to contribute financially, but only provided a limited amount (Marki-Zay, 2023). A Momentum member believed that DK lost interest in the campaign after Klara Dobrev's defeat in the primaries, asserting that they did not genuinely want to win anymore (Gelencser, 2023). Another respondent, a former member of Marki-Zay's campaign team, observed an inefficient cooperation among opposition politicians, suggesting that they wanted to win but not necessarily with Peter Marki-Zay as the successful candidate: "it was obvious that they didn't like each other and cooperation was not very efficient. I'm not saying that the [opposition politicians] didn't want to win, they wanted to win but they didn't want Peter Marki-Zay to win, they didn't want him to be successful; it was a very poisonous atmosphere" (Rona, 2023).

The defeat of the opposition can be attributed, in large part, to its lack of cohesion and the presence of significant fragmentation and polarisation within the coalition. This sentiment was echoed by both opposition politicians and non-partisan respondents, who identified several key factors contributing to this disunity. One clear manifestation of the lack of unity within the opposition was evident in their campaign posters. Respondent 9 pointed out that the posters rarely featured all the leaders together; instead, they predominantly highlighted individual candidates or combinations of candidates, indicating a lack of a cohesive collective identity (Respondent 9). This fragmentation was acknowledged by the politicians themselves during interviews, with Attila Mesterhazy remarking, "We have a lot of conflicts. We did not act like a real cooperation. People could not believe that the opposition coalition could govern together" (Mesterhazy, 2022). Bence Tordai concurred with his colleague, admitting that there were tensions between parties, reflecting a lack of genuine unity and wholehearted cooperation (Tordai, 2023). Non-partisan respondents also expressed similar views, with one remarking, "Rhetorically, the opposition was united. In fact, at the organizational level, at rank-and-file level they were heavily divided" (Gallai, 2023). It became apparent that the unity was only nominal, as the opposition parties campaigned with varying intensity, indicating a lack of shared commitment: "the opposition parties were only united in their name because they call themselves "United for Hungary", but it was only a unity in the name because not all of the players campaigned with the same intensity" (Biro-Nagy, 2022).

Moreover, the presence of divisive individuals and parties in the coalition further exacerbated fragmentation. The inclusion of right-wing Jobbik in the coalition was seen by Respondent 9 as potentially discrediting the entire coalition, particularly among left-leaning voters, given the differences in their ideologies (Respondent 9). Jobbik's positioning as right-wing on social issues and centre-left on economic matters clashed with the strongly left-leaning stances of Momentum and Dialogue parties. Adding to the divisive nature, former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany's participation was also viewed as problematic. Respondents argued that Gyurcsany's presence had a significant impact on the election outcome, with his divisive reputation deterring some voters from supporting the opposition: "Unification was a trap for the opposition and they could not tackle this challenge. [...] If Gyurcsany is not there, the opposition is weak. If Gyurcsany is there, the opposition has an upper ceiling above which they cannot overcome" (Gallai, 2023). Gyurcsany's involvement in the campaign, despite being asked to stay out of it, and the perception that he was acting as the "real boss" in the background further undermined the opposition's cohesion: "Many times, Gyurcsany was too active. When Peter Marki-Zay asked him not to involve in campaign, then officially he never went to campaign events, but in the social media he was always criticising the campaign and acting like a boss who is not satisfied with the story what the others are doing without him. So people could have the impression that in the background the real boss is Ferenc Gyurcsany" (Harangozo, 2022). For many voters, Gyurcsany and Orbán were seen as two sides of the same coin, leading them to shy away from any coalition involving Gyurcsany (Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). Peter Marki-Zay, the opposition's prime ministerial candidate, emerged as a decisive figure as well. His victory in the primaries, despite not belonging to any of the party members, created a sense of unease and contention within the coalition. Some party leaders openly challenged his leadership, resulting in an atmosphere of tension and skepticism among the opposition (Tordai, 2023). Additionally, respondents noted that Marki-Zay's conservative Christian libertarian views set him apart from the other coalition parties, making him something of an outsider within the coalition: "He is a libertarian, a conservative Christian libertarian, totally outside of the box" (Gelencser, 2023).

In conclusion, the opposition's fragmentation and polarisation severely damaged its image as a cohesive and viable alternative in the eyes of the voters. The lack of unity was evident in various aspects of the election, from campaign posters to open debates filled with personal rivalries. The presence of divisive figures and parties within the coalition further discredited its

credibility among the electorate. The constant mention of these issues in almost all interviews, along with the agreement of both partisan and non-partisan respondents on their significance, underscores the pivotal role of polarisation and fragmentation in the opposition's defeat. Moving forward, addressing these internal divisions and striving for genuine unity and shared goals will be essential for the opposition to present a stronger challenge in future elections.

Self-ignorance of the Opposition

The self-ignorance of the opposition emerged as a significant factor contributing to its defeat, as nearly half of the respondents acknowledged. This self-ignorance refers to the coalition's lack of awareness regarding its own positions, capabilities, weaknesses, and, crucially, the strengths of Fidesz during the campaign. Attila Mesterhazy emphasized that the opposition failed to grasp the public's perception of the FIDESZ government, noting that not everything Fidesz had done was viewed negatively by the people: “opposition could not understand what people think about the FIDESZ government: it's not true that everything that Fidesz has done is perceived bad by people” (Mesterhazy, 2022). Despite this, the prime ministerial candidate, Peter Marki-Zay, appeared confident during the interviews, asserting that the opposition coalition was an effective tool to combat Fidesz. He even suggested that Prime Minister Orban was tense on election day, fearing a potential defeat—a scenario that had never been a real possibility in the past twelve years: [Orban] was so tense on the day of the election. He couldn't smile because he feared, he had huge fear of losing; for the first time in the 12 years, now he had a very credible opposition, now he had the chance to be defeated” (Marki-Zay, 2023). However, such optimism was not grounded in reality, as even their most optimistic expectations fell far short of the actual result (Gelencser, 2023).

An illustrative example of the opposition's self-ignorance is evident in the relationship between the campaign's centre in Budapest and the regions. An independent MP shared a story with an international organization representative, expressing frustration at the lack of support received from the centre despite being in a swing district (Respondent 9, 2022). Jobbik party member, Patrik Schwarcz-Kiefer, elaborated on the disconnect between the centre and the regions, explaining that the opposition's activity and resources in the countryside were inadequate: “from the centres it's another picture than what we experience on the frontline[reason] and this

is the main reason why I guess we cannot be successful because with these few activists and the members are not always active” (Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). The parties had minimal human resources in the regions, with little ongoing activity between elections. This deficiency severely hampered the opposition's ability to win elections in these areas. Furthermore, Schwarcz-Kiefer emphasized the personalized nature of politics at the local level, highlighting the importance of having a strong and active candidate in the regions. However, the management of the coalition seemed to dismiss these realities and chose to ignore the problems on the ground: “I told them this type of communication was not effective and they said that they know local issues better and what you experience is not as common thing, it is just your personal experience” (ibid).

Moreover, communication between the regions and the centre was not smooth and effective, further exacerbating the self-ignorance of the opposition. Schwarcz-Kiefer described a cumbersome process involving multiple intermediaries for passing messages from the party candidates in the regions to the centre, causing delays and inefficiencies: “there was a person between the party candidates, every party had a contact person in the centre. So, one contact person in the party, who called the contact person for the party in the centre and so after these two phone calls, you could give a message to the centre” (ibid). The decision-making process was also bogged down by slow bureaucracy and endless negotiations with numerous involved parties, hindering the coalition's ability to make swift and decisive campaign decisions: “decision making was extremely slow, it went terrible: [there are] any veto players, and in a campaign sometimes you have to make swift decisions and you don't have time for endless negotiations with so many involved parties” (Rona, 2023).

While not all respondents highlighted the self-ignorance factor as significantly as Patrik Schwarcz-Kiefer did, his daily communication with the local population allowed him to see the problems more realistically and assess them critically. It is also worth noting that when asked what was their first reaction when they saw the election results, most of the politicians said they were shocked, meaning they had better expectations. In conclusion, self-ignorance emerged as a crucial factor contributing to the opposition's defeat, stemming from a lack of awareness regarding its own positions, capabilities, and Fidesz's strengths. The disconnection between the campaign's centre and the regions, as well as the flawed communication and decision-making processes, further compounded the opposition's lack of understanding. While not all respondents highlighted this factor as significantly as others, Patrik Schwarcz-Kiefer's

insight from his daily interactions with the local population provides valuable context. To fully understand the impact of self-ignorance on the election outcome, first, it is essential to consider all frequently mentioned factors comprehensively.

Candidates and Primaries

The significance of lacking strong candidates, especially outside the capital, emerged as a problematic aspect, as highlighted by almost half of the respondents. Professor Gallai succinctly described the typical opposition candidate in rural districts, illustrating the disconnection between candidates and their constituencies: "Who was the opposition's candidate? That's a village and the candidate in that constituency came from a town 50 kilometres away who once during the campaign showed up in the village and had a small rally where he presented his own views. No one knew him. He was an urban guy and this was the rural constituency" (Gallai, 2022). The selection of candidates for certain constituencies was allegedly influenced by behind-the-scenes negotiations between parties, leading to less effective choices. According to Gallai, this resulted in candidates being decided by party leaderships rather than through genuine intra-coalition competition or primaries. Consequently, the final candidates did not necessarily reflect the most popular choices within their constituencies (ibid).

Attila Mesterhazy shared similar concerns about the candidate selection process, expressing disappointment that it lacked true primaries and instead relied on pre-arranged agreements among parties. This approach often left parties in a difficult position, as some of their candidates were not allowed to run, leading to campaign challenges and internal conflicts: "It was not a real selection of the people because the selection was done by the parties before, of course, behind the curtain". The name recognition in that constituency he had was 20%, mine was 95%, you could not compare, but because of the fact that there was some selection before among the parties, that's why it was not a real competition" (Mesterhazy, 2022). The absence of real primaries was also criticized by a Jobbik member, who observed that in some constituencies, candidates were selected without adequately considering their recognition and activity within the constituency: "in a lot of constituencies it was like that there was the primaries, somebody from nothing, he got the logos of the parties because in Budapest they

thought that he is the better candidate... the main goal of the primary is to find the best candidate and in a lot of situation they did not find the best candidate, they found a candidate which was in favour of DK or which was in favour of Jobbik or which was in favour of MSZP” (Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). He gave an example of a DK candidate, who was selected as a result of negotiations: “she was candidate of the opposition (DK) having a full-time job, without a driving licence in a constituency with 170 villages. Wasn’t it obvious at the beginning that she is not the best candidate for a constituency with 170 villages without a driving licence?” He emphasized the importance of candidates being accessible and present in their constituencies throughout the years, fostering a sense of connection with the voters:

While the significance of the candidates and primaries factor was acknowledged by almost half of the respondents, it was discussed less frequently than other opposition mistakes and weaknesses. However, it is essential to recognize that the limited frequency of mentions does not diminish its potential impact. The selection of candidates holds profound implications for the opposition's performance in each constituency and their ability to connect with voters effectively. Furthermore, three respondents randomly mentioned the impact of Jobbik party's split, which weakened the opposition. Some of their former voters shifted support to the newly-established radical right Mi Hazank party, while others may have voted for Fidesz or remained loyal to Jobbik, resulting in a loss of support for the united opposition (Respondent 5, Respondent 9, Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). The party's split had some effect on the overall dynamics of the opposition and contributed to its diminished success.

In conclusion, the lack of strong candidates, particularly in rural areas, emerged as a concerning aspect in the opposition's campaign. The absence of genuine primaries and reliance on behind-the-scenes negotiations to determine candidates raised questions about the appropriateness of those selected for certain constituencies. This issue further complicated the opposition's efforts to present a unified front to the electorate. While not as frequently mentioned as other factors, it remains an essential aspect to consider when assessing the reasons for the opposition's defeat.

FIDESZ STRENGTHS

Resources: Finances, Media and Administrative Power

The impact of Fidesz's strengths on voter behaviour and the defeat of the opposition in the Parliamentary Elections should not be underestimated, as highlighted by almost all respondents. The advantages and favourable starting positions that Fidesz enjoyed in the elections were frequently discussed, with respondents attempting to elucidate the potential effects of these factors on voters. Stability and the "old shoes" principle were perceived as influential elements in voter decisions, particularly during times of crisis, such as the war in a neighbouring country, which will be explored further in the following chapter (Respondent 9). Notably, a survey from an international organization revealed that despite the conflict nearby, a significant portion (84%) of the Hungarian population felt secure, potentially reinforcing their inclination to maintain the status quo (ibid). The voters' inclination to maintain the status quo was also intertwined with their perception of economic well-being. With 59% of the population viewing their household's economic situation as "very good" and 13% as "somewhat good," the election results can partially be attributed to a sense of confidence in the country's economic trajectory (Gallai, 2022). The dynamic economic growth and wage increases achieved during Fidesz's tenure were significant contributors to this perception (ibid). Dialogue Party member Tordai acknowledged this economic progress, stating that more people are now employed in Hungary than a decade ago, which Fidesz strategically utilized to bolster their narrative about successful economic policies (Tordai, 2022).

Examining Fidesz's specific resources that contributed to their ability to secure another 2/3 majority, their economic capabilities stood out as crucial assets to mobilize voters. Fidesz's substantial financial resources allowed them to invest in research to better understand voters' priorities, enabling them to tailor their campaign messages effectively (ibid). This financial advantage granted them the capacity to manipulate communication strategies to achieve desired outcomes (Marki-Zay, 2023). PM candidate Marki-Zay raised concerns about the extent of Fidesz's resources, indicating that they hired a team of 100 individuals to investigate his background and generate scandals to discredit him (ibid). He emphasized that the opposition's defeat was primarily attributed to Fidesz's overwhelming resources, likening it to an army with an insurmountable advantage over a much smaller force: "You can have the best strategy on

the battlefield, but if your army is 1/100 of the size of Wehrmacht or the Red Army, you cannot defeat them. So even with the best strategy, even with the best political programme, best candidates, the strength of the two campaigns is determined by your resources, financial and communication resources” (Marki-Zay, 2022). A journalist echoed this sentiment, asserting that the playing field was so uneven that defeating Fidesz seemed impossible (Respondent 5, 2022). The lopsided nature of the political contest was metaphorically illustrated by Andras Biro-Nagy, who compared the opposition to a football team playing with two red cards against Fidesz, which had an extra player and biased referees (Biro-Nagy, 2022). The disparity in advertising expenditure was also evident, with Fidesz reportedly spending approximately ten times more on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube than the opposition (Respondent 5, 2022).

Beyond party finances, Fidesz benefited from state financial resources used to introduce various social programs and benefits, targeting specific groups within society (Mesterhazy, 2022). The utilization of state resources for campaigning purposes, along with their influence over defining electoral rules, significantly boosted Fidesz's chances of re-election (Marki-Zay, 2023). Fidesz's use of financial resources allegedly extended to vote-buying strategies, according to the opposition. For instance, Fidesz members of parliament were known to attend events in their constituencies and distribute small presents, often funded by the state budget (Harangozo, 2022). In municipalities, Fidesz mayors were accused of going beyond legal boundaries to convince people to vote for their party, providing financial incentives to persuade voters: “In the municipalities, the [Fidesz] Mayors have done everything even beyond the law to convince the people to vote for Fidesz. They gave some money to the poor people in these small villages and possibly told them how to vote” (Olah, 2022). The combination of Fidesz's vast financial resources, access to state funds for campaign purposes, and control over communication strategies fortified their position, creating an unequal playing field that significantly influenced the electoral outcome. The abundance of resources at Fidesz's disposal allowed them to maintain a dominant grip on power, even in the face of a united opposition. This aspect cannot be overlooked when analysing the reasons behind the opposition's defeat in the elections.

Except for financial resources, there is administrative resource which in fragile democracies is usually very much in favour of a ruling party. One part of it is the power that Fidesz has over the opposition-leaning municipalities: the locals have reported that less investments are coming

from the central government to the town because they voted for the opposition Mayor candidate, and because of that they think it would be better if they voted for Fidesz (Respondent 9, 2022). Peter Marki-Zay also gave an example of the city (Hodmezovasarhely) where he is elected as a Mayor, stating that decision about his town not receiving any offsets for increasing energy costs was politically motivated, aimed at punishing the locals for voting for the opposition candidate in local elections: “They want to show an example. If the city votes for anybody in opposition, then they will be punished” (Marki-Zay, 2023). Introducing state-funded programs can also be considered as the misuse of administrative resources: “people tend to vote for Fidesz because of the financial incentives. Fidesz was, in a way, quite smart to introduce policies and measures which favour certain social groups (Gallai, 2022). It is also worth noting that “the municipalities in small villages are the biggest employers, so in municipalities they did everything to convince people to vote for the governing party. Fidesz also said: if we are not going to win in this constituency, you will not get money from the government” (Olah, 2022), which is another clear example of threatening and misusing administrative resources. “These mayors were all given the directive, OK, you have to come with 20 people, you have to come with 100 people and they were paid. In the village, [they tell people] please come and I give you 5000, I give you 10,000 just come” (Marki-Zay, 2023). Fidesz’ power is also determined by their influence over all branches of government, including judiciary: “The wife of the local Fidesz party leader was the judge who made the sentence in my case. So, what did you expect? They control the judiciary system and the courts now” (ibid).

Disproportional election system, which can be considered as the administrative power of Fidesz was another frequently mentioned factor especially by the opposition leaders. “Election system does not favour those parties who are not the incumbent players” (Mesterhazy, 2022). The reason is that according to the amendments in the election law, a party that is running with a separate list, must have its own individual candidates in 71/106 constituencies [instead of 27 as previously], which makes it hard for the parties run separately and are forced to coalesce (Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). The problem that this rule creates it that “Basically, it was impossible to defeat Fidesz without a total opposition cooperation” (Marki-Zay, 2023) which ultimately loses the votes of some opposition voters who are intolerant with some of the coalition partners, such as Gyurcsany, or Jobbik, or even the PM candidate. “Fidesz created bipolar political system, where it controls 1/2 of the electorate, the other half is segmented from far right to far left, socialists, liberals, conservatives, greens, everybody. If they are all split, if they don't unite, then they don't have a chance, Fidesz could win.” (ibid). Except for the requirement of having

more than 71 candidates, there were other changes to the election law which the opposition considers unfavourable for themselves: only one-round system is another reason why they have to cooperate even with unfavourable partners (Olah, 2022).

The third frequently cited resource that significantly influenced the election results was the media. Opposition leaders contended that traditional media outlets remain the primary information sources for most Hungarians, and the prevalence of pro-government media outlets promoting anti-opposition narratives worked in favour of Fidesz's electoral victory. Marki-Zay lamented that despite their resources, opposition messages struggled to reach the electorate as Fidesz controlled a vast majority of FM radio stations, allowing them to spread misinformation and smear campaigns (Marki-Zay, 2023). Similar dominance was evident in TV channels and newspapers, with 99% under Fidesz's control. Consequently, opposition leaders, including a DK member, faced limited opportunities to appear on national TV, hampering their ability to communicate with the public (Olah, 2022).

In rural areas where traditional media is more prevalent and public channels dominate, Fidesz's influence over media narratives becomes even more pronounced. Harangozo highlighted how Fidesz portrayed the opposition as dangerous devils threatening the locals' safety, effectively shaping perceptions and opinions (Harangozo, 2022).

The opposition's tone, particularly that of the Prime Minister candidate, appeared pessimistic, attributing their defeat to Fidesz's overwhelming power. Marki-Zay seemed convinced that democracy was effectively non-existent and that defeating Orban's ruling party was an insurmountable task (Marki-Zay, 2023). While the opposition repeatedly emphasized the significance of Fidesz's resources, it is important to acknowledge that partisan interviewees were more inclined to blame Fidesz's strengths for their defeat, rather than non-partisan respondents. Among the politicians, the Prime Minister candidate emerged as the most vocal in attributing their defeat to Fidesz's resources.

Fidesz Campaign Messages

Fidesz's campaign messages emerged as a dominant strength against the opposition, with all respondents attributing the election results to effective messaging. The party employed a two-pronged approach, comprising positive messages and an aggressive anti-opposition "black PR" campaign. The positive aspect revolved around the themes of "God, Patria, and Family," forming the foundation of Fidesz's narrative (Mesterhazy, 2022). They have a positive vision for the future, resonating with the Hungarian people: "They do offer something like a programme, they have the way they look at the world" (Szadai, 2022). Fidesz effectively addressed issues that mattered to the majority of Hungarians, emphasizing the desire for peace and economic stability: "Fidesz was campaigning with the issues that Hungarians cared the most, because they wanted peace, no war here in Hungary, we don't want to be dragged into it and he [Orban] offered the economic stability and that was also main reason" (Biro-Nagy, 2022). A significant factor in their success was Orban's ability to connect with the average Hungarian, understanding their thoughts, emotions, and attachment to traditions and national identity, translating these insights into their political agenda (Respondent 5). Non-partisan interviewees, including journalists and analysts, objectively acknowledged the strength of Fidesz's positive agenda and messaging. An international organization representative mentioned research indicating that Fidesz's campaign had a strong, structured, and disciplined message across all candidates and campaign activities (Respondent 5, 2022). Focus group participants also praised Orban's eloquence and enthusiasm during speeches, contributing to the effectiveness of their campaign (ibid).

However, the negative aspect of Fidesz's campaign was equally potent. They skillfully framed and portrayed the opposition as a disaster waiting to happen if they were to assume power (Tordai, 2022). Fidesz tapped into people's worst fears, building a campaign around these negative emotions (ibid). They particularly focused on linking Ferenc Gyurcsany to the opposition leadership, despite him holding no official position during the campaign. Through billboards featuring Marki-Zay as a mini-me of Gyurcsany, Fidesz aimed to present an equivalence between the two leaders, giving voters the impression of choosing between Orban and Gyurcsany, where Fidesz held a considerable advantage (Marki-Zay, 2023). This tactic appeared to sway former Jobbik voters towards Fidesz, associating Gyurcsany with their fears and prejudices (Marki-Zay, 2023). Gyurcsany became a convenient target for Fidesz, similar to other campaigns rallied against Soros, the European Union, the United States, Brussels,

migrants, inflation, sanctions, and LGBTQ rights, among others, perpetuating a sense of constant threats that only Fidesz could protect the Hungarians against (Tordai, 2022).

Moreover, the opposition claimed that a barrage of false allegations and manipulated information significantly harmed their campaign. For instance, Fidesz used a misleading 4-second video, taken out of context, to falsely accuse Marki-Zay of intending to close down hospitals in rural Hungary (Marki-Zay, 2023). “Jesus Christ would have been crucified here as well and he would have been a migrant supporter, LGBTQ activist, Gyurcsany’s man, Soros’ man, anti-Hungarian traitor” (Marki-Zay, 2023). This campaign was damaging to the opposition's image, with both the PM candidate and an MSZP member acknowledging its success in portraying Marki-Zay as a puppet of Gyurcsany (Harangozo, 2022).

In conclusion, Fidesz's adept use of campaign messages played a pivotal role in their victory. Their positive agenda resonated with the population, while their negative "black PR" campaign skillfully framed the opposition as a dangerous alternative. Coupled with a barrage of false allegations and manipulated information, Fidesz's messaging effectively shaped public opinion and swayed voters in their favour.

INDEPENDENT FACTORS

Opposition Prime Minister Candidate

Although it is debatable whether the opposition Prime Minister candidate Peter Marki-Zay was an independent factor for the election results or it can be regarded as one of the weaknesses of the opposition as a whole, since the mistakes and weaknesses mainly included objective factors such as lack of resources and flawed messaging, it is worth considering the PM candidate factor separately. Also, the number of respondents mentioning Marki-Zay as a reason for the opposition's defeat or Fidesz's 2/3 majority warrants separate consideration of his influence. “In two months-time we were ashamed that he was the candidate, he was a one big mistake” (Mesterhazy, 2022).

One reason why the opposition thinks he was not a good candidate is that he does not have an extensive political experience which led him to unapologetic mistakes. Notably, his response to the Russia-Ukraine war question was perceived as a major political error, as he appeared uncertain and indecisive about Hungary's stance within NATO (Szadai, 2022). He made numerous missteps, resulting in a lack of credibility and frequent need to explain his statements taken out of context (Mesterhazy, 2022). Furthermore, his right-wing economic stances conflicted with the opposition's largely left-wing social program, alienating certain voters: “economic right-wing in this country is unacceptable for a lot of voters and the main messages of Marki-Zay were like this” despite the fact that more or less left-wing social program was the only common thing of the opposition coalition parties (Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). “Peter Marki-Zay’s perceived failure to communicate during the campaign restricted willingness of some to potentially vote for the opposition” (Respondent 9, 2022). Many criticized his lack of understanding of politics and inability to work cohesively with others, leading to a fragmented opposition campaign: “Peter Marki-Zay lacks the understanding of politics, how politics work... civilians do not do politics, they do not run in elections. That was the biggest mistake - bad candidate, and we were probably too easy on this subject” (Gyongyosi, 2023). “He was an amateur politically. And it's not like that that you are born as a good politician but you have to get better and if you don't have the experience then you are going to have problems like this and he had. He could have been more careful. I'm not saying that I could have got a better answer for this question (regarding Russia-Ukraine war), but I also wasn't a candidate for Prime Minister of the country” (Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). The argument about the lack of experience was also extended to his team by the interviewees: “His campaign had basic problems. I would go with another candidate, top candidate and their team who had been working together for years, they know their job, they have done similar things before. Involving new forces to a campaign is always great, but if the whole team is completely new to the top politics, it's a disaster” (Tordai, 2022). “This campaign was an amateur campaign. Those who organised it, those who led it, they were mainly amateurs. They haven't got any experience in a big campaign. In campaigns, yes, but in a national campaign like this, they [Marki-Zay’s team] haven't got any experience” (Schwarcz-Kiefer, 2022). “I think people got really freaked out because Marki-Zay had these messages that were kind of all over the board and it was just easier to say I'm not going to have a new government right now, I'd rather stick” (Respondent 9, 2022).

One of the examples of Marki-Zay's bad communication was given by a representative of international organization "I was out in Gyongyos, which is a town about 80 kilometres north and east of here and there's this big coal plant, which employees 8-9 thousand people and Marki-Zay Peter comes out to campaign there and the first thing he says is that they're going to close that power plant. The local candidate told me, I hope he will not come back here because in the middle of this speech he talks about closing this plant and I don't know if I can recover from that" (Respondent 9, 2022). "There was a problem where people didn't see a cohesion of the coalition, but Marki-Zay Peter I think just got more and more less focused and said dumb things really" (ibid). The survey results that the respondent mentioned also highlighted that what voters did not like about Marki-Zay was that "he reportedly contradicted himself, or was unclear on several issues". There was even listed the objectives referred to weaknesses: naive, underqualified, not smart, inexperienced, unprepared, insulting, clown puppet, guided by former Prime Minister Gyurcsany" (ibid). While it seems that Marki-Zay was targeting Fidesz' conservative voters, he lost hearts of some of the opposition voters: "He's coming from the right, he used to be a Fidesz voter. He always told this when we had these meetings. But our voters, opposition's main voters, are coming from the left and they didn't like to hear that the Prime Minister used to be a FIDESZ voter" (Olah, 2022). Marki-Zay's "values and what he thinks about the world is not in touch with the majority of the Hungarian society. And he also made some very big mistakes in the campaign, it also has to be mentioned, which was exploited by the government propaganda" (Biro-Nagy, 2022). "The candidate became a man who is conservative, who really cannot share the same values as the voters and the parties behind him, and it was totally controversial and all the big problems started after he became the Prime Minister candidate" (Harangozo, 2022).

Marki-Zay's character and behaviour emerged as problematic for both opposition politicians and non-partisan actors. He was perceived as aggressive towards other opposition parties and displayed an unyielding, self-confident demeanour. According to his former campaign team member, "Marki-Zay was very aggressive towards the other opposition parties. He revealed his intentions of forming an own party and just pulling the votes of the other parties. So, he acted as a rival, not a supporter (Rona, 2023). Also, according to other interviewees, Marki-Zay is uncompromisingly self-confident. "He thought that he is a Jesus Christ" (Mesterhazy, 2022). "He's extremely hot headed[reason], so if he decides that this is going to happen then that is going to happen and he doesn't care about ideas" (Gelencser, 2023). Jobbik member noted that "it's not good to have psychopaths running for any post, especially Prime Minister

candidacy post. I could see signs with Victor Orban, and I think there are clear signs of that with Peter Perki-Zay, I'm serious. So, I think psychiatric test would be a good idea. In countries like Singapore, they do it and I presume for a very good reason” (Gyongyosi, 2023). The non-partisan actors also have similar impression of him: “His personality was not unifying the voters, not the parties. And as they say, people do not really like to work together with him. He's selfish, he thinks that he knows everything about everything” (Respondent 5, 2022). Also, he was openly challenging the opposition during the campaign which did not seem consistent in the eyes of voters: “we had a leadership problem because our front runner came from outside and he remained an outsider: he challenged the existing parties during the campaign when he was leading these parties’ coalition (Tordai, 2022). “He accepted the party list, put together by the party leaders and also accepted the presence of Gyurcsany among the top candidates. And that message that “I'm here to replace the opposition”, of course, undermines his credibility” (Gallai, 2022). “He was campaigning with the opposition parties, but he was also speaking about changing the opposition” (Olah, 2022). “He was not focusing on his main job to be the Prime Minister candidate, but he thought for him is the best opportunity to take the lead of the opposition” (Olah, 2022). “He was always very firm and every single sentence he made, he never apologised, and he was hurting the electorate. And that's a typical campaign mistake when you blame the electorate who should vote for you” (Gallai, 2022).

Marki-Zay's handling of opposition meetings and coordination also came under scrutiny. Described as "crazy" by some, his approach was deemed chaotic and off-putting for certain party leaders, who chose not to participate: “Crazy meetings, some party leaders decided not to join after a while because it was really crazy how he was managing this” (Olah, 2022). Marki-Zay also was involved in the very technical details of the campaign, which the interviewees think he should not have been involved in: “He started to say that this is not a good colour and he was studying in the United States, he knows marketing and there should be this [diagonal]... and [the font] should be not less than 16 and not more than 18. And he was the Prime Minister Candidate, speaking about how big the letter should be?!” (Olah, 2022). As for Marki-Zay himself, during the interview, he mainly focused on the Fidesz’ advantages, as discussed in the chapter above, while he constantly denied the need to speak about the opposition’s mistakes: “I think that's a mistake to talk about [it]... We made many, many mistakes, of course. But it doesn't matter, no significance whatsoever” (Marki-Zay, 2023). However, when asked an additional question about what he thinks was the biggest mistake that he made as a candidate, he said that “Apparently that I said this one segment that they used to

justify that they would bring people to the war[reason]. But you know, even that one is of course tweaked by Fidesz. It was dragged out of its context, and I said that we are not going to go to war, but yes, we would support NATO. They will only take this 4 second segments and use it against me and so many others” (ibid).

In summary, respondents, particularly opposition politicians, agree that Marki-Zay, a right-wing conservative, was not the most suitable Prime Minister candidate for leading a left-wing coalition. Although some voters were lost due to his messages, communication style, and inexperience, interviewees believe that even without him, the opposition would not have secured a victory. Nonetheless, they suggest that Marki-Zay's shortcomings might have contributed to Fidesz's 2/3 majority (Olah, 2022). Some even speculate that with a different candidate, like Gergely Koracsony, the opposition could have avoided the crushing defeat (Harangozo, 2022).

War

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine proved to be a pivotal moment in the election campaign, significantly altering the political landscape and priorities. As one respondent noted, "the turning point of the campaign was when the war in Ukraine started" (Szadai, 2022). The war's emergence on the agenda overshadowed other issues, such as education and healthcare, shifting the focus of the campaign (Olah, 2022). Due to its distinctive character, appearing only four weeks before the election and completely reshaping communication on both sides, the war can be considered an independent factor with a profound impact on the election results and the subsequent defeat of the opposition.

The war's influence on the election was evident, with nearly all respondents attributing significant importance to its presence. It became a central factor as the government portrayed itself as the protector against the war's threat, while simultaneously blaming the opposition for potentially dragging Hungary into the conflict. The government effectively crafted a narrative suggesting that the opposition's victory would endanger Hungary's security, capitalizing on a segment from Marki-Zay's interview in which he stated that as Prime Minister, he would obey NATO's decision in case of intervention in the conflict (Marki-Zay, 2023). This narrative,

supported by paid advertising and widespread media coverage, sought to present Orbán's party as the guardian of peace and stability while painting the opposition as a war-hungry alternative (Biro-Nagy, 2022).

The opposition's handling of the war issue was perceived as lacking, leading to fears among voters and a loss of credibility. Respondents acknowledged that the government orchestrated a massive campaign associating the opposition with warmongering, instilling fear among the electorate: "I think this was the main reason - the war and how the opposition mishandled this situation and how Fidesz handled it professionally" (Respondent 5, 2022). The opposition's alleged mishandling of the situation further fuelled this narrative, leading to public concern and scepticism (Tordai, 2023). Momentum member noted that allegedly, Marki-Zay was informed about the possible Russian invasion of Ukraine days before it occurred but failed to respond adequately, squandering a crucial opportunity to address the issue (Gelencser, 2023).

According to Marki-Zay himself, the war played a decisive role in securing Fidesz's overwhelming 2/3 majority victory (Marki-Zay, 2023). Other respondents concurred, suggesting that without the war, Fidesz might have won, but the opposition's defeat would have been less significant (Biro-Nagy, 2022). During times of crisis, particularly international ones, the inclination to support the incumbent government tends to increase as people seek stability and security: a war at their neighbours, you'd be more reluctant to look for a new government, right?" (Respondent 9, 2022). The war's effect on the election was not solely confined to Hungary, as foreign policy crises often bolster support for the political establishment facing domestic difficulties (Gyongyosi, 2023). A survey conducted by an international organization also indicated that Marki-Zay's position on the war lacked clarity and visibility, potentially contributing to the opposition's defeat (Respondent 9, 2022).

In summary, the war's sudden appearance and its subsequent impact on the campaign dramatically influenced the election results, leading to the opposition's defeat and Fidesz's resounding 2/3 majority victory. The government's effective manipulation of the narrative, portraying itself as the protector against war and the opposition as war-seeking, proved effective in swaying public opinion. Additionally, during times of international crisis, people tend to lean toward supporting the incumbent government, further bolstering Fidesz's electoral advantage. Ultimately, the war emerged as a decisive independent factor that significantly shaped the outcome of the election.

CONCLUSION

The 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election marked a pivotal moment in the nation's political landscape, resulting in an overwhelming victory for the ruling party, Fidesz, which secured a 2/3 majority in the National Assembly. The opposition's defeat raised questions about the factors contributing to their failure to capitalize on widespread discontent and create a viable alternative for the voters. This research offers a comprehensive analysis of both partisan and non-partisan in-depth interviews to unravel the most critical reasons for the opposition's defeat, determining with the frequency and intensity of mentions the three most important factors: mistakes in the opposition's communication and campaign, an ineffective prime minister candidate, and the formidable resources of Fidesz, complemented by their effective messaging strategy. In fact, the reasons mentioned by the interviewees primarily contradict the conditions for the success of political parties listed at the end of the literature review.

The opposition's failure to present a cohesive and compelling communication strategy emerged as a significant reason behind their defeat. Partisan and non-partisan interviewees alike highlighted the lack of a unified narrative, where individual parties struggled to find common ground and create a coherent vision for Hungary's future, a clear alternative to the incumbent. This dissonance allowed Fidesz to exploit the opposition's weaknesses, painting them as divided and ineffective. A primary aspect of the opposition's flawed communication was their inability to effectively counter Fidesz's campaign messages. While Fidesz effectively crafted positive messages centring on traditional values like "God, Patria, and Family," the opposition struggled to offer a compelling alternative. Non-partisan respondents pointed out that the opposition's messaging lacked clarity and resonance, which made it difficult for voters to connect with their proposals.

In contrast, Fidesz launched an effective negative campaign against the opposition's prime minister candidate, Peter Marki-Zay. The ruling party framed Marki-Zay as inexperienced and untrustworthy, successfully damaging his image in the eyes of the electorate. The opposition's failure to counter this narrative allowed Fidesz to consolidate its support base while further alienating potential swing voters. The lack of an effective ground campaign was also a detrimental factor. The opposition's poor organisation and communication on the local level hindered their ability to mobilise supporters and gain momentum. Fidesz, on the other hand,

capitalized on its extensive grassroots network and administrative resources to build an efficient ground campaign.

Partisan and non-partisan interviewees overwhelmingly identified Peter Marki-Zay's candidacy as a critical factor in the opposition's defeat. Marki-Zay's lack of extensive political experience became a major concern for both opposition parties and voters. His perceived inexperience led to a series of unapologetic mistakes, such as his response to the Russia-Ukraine war, where he failed to provide a clear answer to the question about Hungary's potential involvement in the conflict. This reinforced the perception of him as unfit for the role of prime minister, further eroding public confidence in the opposition coalition. Moreover, Marki-Zay's conservative background alienated left-wing voters, leading to internal dissonance within the coalition. The lack of cohesion and disagreement among opposition parties weakened their collective appeal to voters seeking a unified and credible alternative to Fidesz. The opposition's prime minister candidate was also criticized for his aggressive communication style and self-confidence, which discouraged potential supporters. Non-partisan respondents noted that Marki-Zay's inability to work collaboratively and his reluctance to heed advice from experienced politicians undermined his credibility and appeal as a leader.

Fidesz's unlimited access to resources emerged as a decisive factor in the opposition's defeat. The ruling party's control over financial and administrative resources allowed them to manipulate the political landscape, voter behaviour in the regions through the state-funded programs. Respondents, both partisan and non-partisan, pointed to Fidesz's misuse of administrative power, withholding investments from opposition-leaning areas, and intimidating voters with the threat of losing government funding. The ruling party's strong financial backing enabled them to run an extensive campaign across all media channels, dominating the narrative and influencing public opinion. Fidesz's effective messaging strategy, focused on traditional values, resonated with conservative voters and successfully tapped into nationalistic sentiments. The party successfully portrayed itself as the protector of Hungary's security and stability during a time of international crisis, particularly the war in Ukraine. The opposition's inability to match Fidesz's financial resources severely hindered their ability to communicate effectively and reach voters across the country. Non-partisan respondents acknowledged that Fidesz's financial advantage allowed them to saturate the media with their campaign messages, drowning out the opposition's efforts.

To sum up, the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election witnessed a clear victory for the ruling party, Fidesz, which obtained a 2/3 majority in the National Assembly. Through a comprehensive analysis of both partisan and non-partisan interviews, three key factors emerged as the most crucial reasons behind the opposition's defeat: mistakes in their communication and campaign, an ineffective prime minister candidate, and Fidesz's unlimited resources and right messaging strategy. The opposition's failure to present a unified narrative and counter Fidesz's campaign messages allowed the ruling party to exploit their weaknesses and paint them as dangerous alternative for the country. Additionally, Peter Marki-Zay's lack of political experience and conservative background alienated left-wing voters and undermined the opposition's collective appeal, while Fidesz's control over financial and administrative resources significantly tilted the playing field in their favour, allowing them to dominate the media narrative and influence.

It is worth mentioning that, although this research has unveiled crucial factors that contributed to the opposition's defeat, it remains a one-sided assessment of the developments. This is primarily because the interviewees consisted mainly of members of political parties, anti-establishment analysts, journalists, and observers. The research does not encompass the other side of the story, particularly the perspective of Fidesz or, more significantly, the perspective of the electorate. Therefore, I believe that, to further enhance the findings of this study, the inclusion of quantitative research on voter preferences would be an exquisite addition.

Appendix

List of Respondents

| Name | Position | Date | Place |
|------------------------|---|-------------|---------------------------|
| Attila Mesterhazy | Member of Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), primary candidate in Veszprem county | 21 Nov 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Levente Szadai | Editor, Journalist at Merce (online newspaper) | 23 Nov 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Gabor Harangozo | Vice-Chairman of Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) | 23 Nov 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Andras Biro-Nagy | Director at Policy Solutions (political research institute) | 24 Nov 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Respondent 5 | Journalist | 29 Nov 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Lajos Olah | Member of Democratic Coalition (DK), Deputy Speaker of the Parliament (MP, Budapest 6 th and 7 th constituencies) | 1 Dec 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Sandor Gallai | Associate Professor, Corvinus University of Budapest | 2 Dec 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Bence Tordai | Co-Chair of Dialogue party (Parbeszed), Member of Parliament (Budapest 4 th constituency) | 2 Dec 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Respondent 9 | Representative of international organisation | 5 Dec 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Patric Schwarcz-Kiefer | Member of Jobbik party, Member of County Council of Baranya | 13 Dec 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Ferenc Gelencser | Chairman of Momentum Movement party, Member of Parliament | 13 Dec 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Marton Gyongyosi | Leader of Jobbik party, Member of European Parliament | 3 Jan 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Daniel Rona | Director at 21 Research Centre (did polls for Marki-Zay before being dismissed) | 4 Jan 2022 | Budapest, Hungary |
| Peter Marki-Zay | Opposition Prime Minister Candidate in 2022, Mayor of Hodmezovasarhely | 5 Jan 2022 | Hodmezovasarhely, Hungary |

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