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A Pyrrhic Victory for the Populist Right in Hungary

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Abstract

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections have produced tectonic shifts in the Hungarian political landscape. While the populist governing party, Fidesz, secured first place in the elections, it lost two seats in the EP, and a new political force emerged that has reshuffled the power balance in Hungary's opposition. Additionally, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his party, along with the pro-government media and social media outlets, spent huge amounts to deliver the government's campaign messages, and the party reportedly broke mobilization records before the election. Orbán's campaign returned to the themes of the 2022 national parliamentary election and made the war in Ukraine its centrepiece. Although the initial campaign slogan was 'no migration, no gender, no war' and all three elements resonated with Fidesz voters the most, the last component has eclipsed the other two. Orbán used fear-mongering and built a Manichean narrative where anybody failing to vote for Fidesz was part of the 'pro-war' camp. He labelled all his domestic and international political opponents 'pro-war' and even claimed that the Hungarian opposition was carrying out the demands of its international financiers in Brussels and Washington. The radical right-wing Our Homeland (OH) focused more on the municipal election yet led a negative campaign against the EU, claiming that Brussels has fallen under the influence of globalists and international interest groups and seeks to build a federal superstate. OH also managed to send one MEP to Strasbourg. Overall, while both Fidesz and OH have joined separate, rebranded, right-wing Eurosceptic groups, their political isolation within the EP remains a challenge.

Keywords: *right-wing populism; Russia–Ukraine War; migration; gender; elites; Brussels; Soros*

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Background

In January 2024, it seemed that elections for the European Parliament (EP) would not hold any great surprises. Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán and his populist Fidesz party were expected to gain a majority of the votes, potentially repeating their electoral success from five years before and securing the party a majority of Hungary's 21 EP seats. Also, it was expected that the radical right-wing populist Our Homeland (OH) party would potentially manage to send one representative to Strasbourg, given the historical success of radical Hungarian parties in European elections. After their defeat in the 2022 national parliamentary elections, opposition parties were still trying to come up with effective strategies to challenge Orbán's government, yet most struggled even to influence the political agenda. Given their repeated losses to Orbán's Fidesz, a growing number of the electorate became disillusioned with them and questioned their political credibility and capabilities. It was in this relative political tranquillity that a political scandal erupted, which eventually led to the emergence of a new political force that redrew the electoral map for Hungary.

In early February 2024 Katalin Novák, the president of the republic, found herself in a clemency scandal. The year before, she had granted a presidential pardon to someone who had helped cover up his superior's paedophile crimes by forcing one of the victims to withdraw his confession. The issue was extremely sensitive given the Orbán government's ongoing 'protect our children' campaign, which was used to mobilize against Hungary's LGBTQ+ community. Although President Novák resigned, as did the former justice minister, Judit Varga, who was supposed to lead the Fidesz party list in the EP elections and who also had to sign off on the pardon, the public never received a justification for the pardon and never got to know the person who initiated the process. After Varga resigned from leading the party in the EP elections, her former husband, Péter Magyar, began posting on social media about the alleged involvement of the government in the matter and criticized them for being too cowardly to sacrifice his former wife instead of those who were truly responsible. Although he initially denied any ambition to become a politician, his first interview on the YouTube channel, Partizán, received so much attention (in the interview, he revealed much of his insider experience as part of the government) that he eventually decided to venture into politics, and established a new party, Respect and Freedom (Tisza). Within a few months, he was touring around the country making speeches and decided to run in the EP elections, where candidates of the party were selected through online voting. Given Magyar's

previous involvement with Fidesz, the governing party had a hard time finding a political antidote to his challenge. For their part, the established opposition parties were caught in a bind as Magyar lacked the kind of credibility challenges vis-à-vis voters they themselves laboured under.

In the end, although Fidesz came in first in the EP elections with 44.82% of the votes, this result is the party's worst performance in an EP election. Pro-government commentators were quick to emphasize that the party received over 2 million votes, more than it had ever achieved before. This increase is largely attributed to the higher-than-average turnout, as the EP elections were held alongside municipal elections. However, this does not change the fact that the governing party (or coalition) has lost 2 seats in the EP and sent only 11 MEPs to Strasbourg. Magyar's Tisza received 29.6% of the votes and sent seven representatives to the EP. The leftist environmentalist coalition (DK–MSZP–P) managed to secure only two seats compared to their previous five (the DK had four, and the MSZP–P had one MEP). In the 2019 EP election, DK received 16.05% of the votes, whereas in 2024, the coalition managed to gain only 8.03%.

While the leftist coalition survived Tisza's challenge, the liberal Momentum did not. The party only received 3.7% of the votes and thus lost its two mandates in the EP. The radical right-wing populist OH doubled its support compared to 2019 and managed to secure one seat in the EP with a vote share of 6.71%. While 11 parties were competing for mandates, in the end, only 4 parties (or party coalitions) will represent the Hungarian people in Strasbourg.

The supply side: Populist tropes featuring war and peace

The governing party, Fidesz (in coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party or KDNP), started its EP campaign with Orbán's 15 March commemoration speech. There, he relied on his usual Eurosceptic populist tropes and claimed that 'Brussels has abandoned Europeans, and even turned against them' (Orbán, 2024) and that 'the people of Europe fear for their freedom in the face of Brussels' (Ibid.). He blamed the EU for wrongdoing and claimed that because of the incompetent leadership in Brussels, 'instead of peace, we have war, instead of security we have a rule-of-law ruckus, instead of prosperity we have financial blackmail' (Ibid.).



Later, Tamás Deutsch, a Fidesz MEP, summarized the party's criticism against 'Brussels' in ten points (Fidesz, 2 April 2024): its failure to manage the COVID-19 crisis; its incompetence in bringing a quick end to the Russia–Ukraine War, and its war-mongering; the European Green Deal; its position on and failure to curb illegal migration; a 'gender ideology' it imposes on member states; its failure to prevent Brexit; its rule-of-law 'jihad' against certain member states; incompetence that led to the collapse of the distribution of EU funds; pushing member states into debt, and; the Hungarian left that acts against the country in Brussels. Although Deutsch criticized the EU on its economic policies, its 'gender agenda', its rule-of-law procedures and migration policies occasionally during the campaign, the party's fundamental message was summarized in the campaign slogan: 'no migration, no gender, no war'. It was repeated so often at the beginning of the campaign that the mayor of a small village even posted it as a 'welcome sign' at the entrance to the village.

The slogan was supposed to reflect the various dimensions of the antagonistic relationship between the position of Fidesz and that of 'Brussels'. As Orbán put it:

They [i.e., Brussels] want to press us into a war, they want to saddle us with migrants, they want to re-educate our children. But we shall not go to war, we shall not let in migrants, and we shall not hand over our children (Orbán, 2024).

Orbán claimed to stop illegal migration into Hungary despite the EU's alleged liberal policies and called for 'resistance' to 'gender ideology' in the name of safeguarding Hungarian children against the alleged LGBTQ+ propaganda. Tamás Menczer, the party's communication officer, even argued that 'we shall never forget that the Hungarian left would destroy the peace and security of Hungary. They would bring us into the war, they would let migrants in, and they would let the gender propaganda loose' (Fidesz, 6 April 2024). While the first two elements of the campaign slogan featured in the social media messages of the governing party in the beginning, the third message, 'no war', gained ever-increasing attention in the party's campaign and ultimately eclipsed the other two. Pro-government social media influencers even went so far as to discuss the implications of a potential nuclear bomb in Budapest as a result of the war psychosis in Brussels and the West in general.

Orbán employed a pro-war versus pro-peace distinction, essentially a form of the Manichean division often utilized by populists. He applied this moral dichotomy not only to European politics but also to the Hungarian political scene. On the one hand, he claimed that:

Brussels is actually a prisoner of George Soros's network ... the Soros network is embedded in the European institutions – so much so that the European institutions are giving them money for their operations ... [T]hey're present within the Commission, they're in the European Parliament, and quite a few prime ministers are clearly Soros-backed people (Fidesz, 22 March 2024a).

Additionally, he also argued that 'the pro-war governments, the bureaucrats in Brussels [and] George Soros' network, are sending millions of dollars to the pro-war left in Budapest' (Fidesz, 19 April 2024). Deploying a typical populist narrative frame, Orbán not only criticized the EU for failing to listen to the people but also linked his domestic opposition with a malevolent elite. He and his party often pictured members of the different opposition parties conspiring with Brussels against Hungary, who were trying to push Hungary into the Ukraine–Russia War. In fact, most party figures who participated in the campaign actually claimed that the Hungarian opposition would enter the war because that is what 'their financiers' (Fidesz, 30 April 2024) are expecting from them. Among others, they claimed that 'the feeding channel, the umbilical cord of the Hungarian left is here in Brussels and America, so they are fed from here, financed from here, bought by the kilo' (Fidesz, 22 March 2024b). They often referred to Brussels and Washington as 'the paymasters of the Hungarian left' (Fidesz, 19 April 2024). Fidesz's messages frequently depicted prominent European politicians, from Emmanuel Macron to Manfred Weber and Ursula von der Leyen, as warmongers. These messages also highlighted their alleged Hungarian allies, including key opposition figures such as former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, MEPs Klára Dobrev, Anna Donáth, Katalin Cseh and the new political actor, Péter Magyar. The claims about a pro-war Hungarian left were also repeated by Tamás Deutsch, Fidesz MEP, in the only televised debate where each party list leader of the EP election (altogether 11 parties) had 8 minutes to 'debate' with one another. Interestingly, the TikTok campaign of the governing party has never mentioned Russia as a responsible actor for the war in Ukraine, instead blaming European actors and NATO for escalating the conflict by supporting Ukraine with money and weapons. Throughout the campaign, it was unclear what Orbán and his party meant by 'peace' and how they would achieve it once their candidates appeared in the EP.

The campaign of the governing party appealed to the most basic fear of the population and constantly pictured the European Parliamentary elections as a decisive battle where people had to decide about war or peace, life or death, whether



one was willing to send his/her sons, grandchildren into the war. Although the social media campaign has built heavily on Orbán – who also toured the country himself, appearing unannounced in different places where he would talk to a selected audience – and his speeches and interviews, other party members also participated in the campaign. Most importantly, Deutsch and another MEP, András László, were quite active in conveying the party messages to the people, mainly about the war. Billboards were also widely used that featured the word ‘war’ made out of pictures of their domestic political opponents and George Soros. In contrast, they also had a billboard with the word ‘peace’ featuring Orbán in the background.

Overall, Orbán and Fidesz have crafted a populist narrative that positions themselves as the voice of peace, claiming to represent the people’s true interests. This narrative sharply contrasts them with all other domestic political actors and their supposed financiers in Brussels. The governmental parties, along with the pro-government social media influencer group Megafon, spent an enormous amount on social media campaigns—more than any other political force in Europe (Portfolio, 2024). In addition, at the ‘Peace March’ held a week before the election, Orbán promised a record-breaking mobilization, which he referred to as ‘the day of one million encounters’ (Fidesz, 5 June 2024).

Although the radical right-wing, populist OH party did not have a specific EP election manifesto, it campaigned with negative messages about the EU. László Toroczkai, the party head, blamed the EU for its undemocratic nature, its globalist agenda, its pursuit of a federal superstate, and its corrupt dealings. The party’s main message centred on the idea that Brussels had been captured by globalist, international interest groups. Interestingly, food safety was frequently highlighted in the party’s social media campaigns. While their primary focus was on the ‘state capture’ accusation against the EU, the party also emphasized issues related to migration into the EU, particularly stressing the security aspect. Their domestic political messages highlighted labour migration as a significant issue, with the party’s MP, Dóra Dúró, advocating for higher wages instead of relying on guest workers and criticizing the government’s strategy to build battery factories. The party’s emphasis on domestic issues was partly due to their greater focus on municipal elections rather than the EP election. With much more limited financial resources than Fidesz, their message distribution was also more restricted.

The demand side: Older, less educated and rural populations as the mainstay of right-wing populism

As pointed out, Fidesz came out on top in the EP elections, even though it secured its worst result ever and effectively lost two mandates compared to 2019. In the capital, Budapest, the difference between the party and its primary challenger, Tisza, was 0.31%, yet in 9 out of 23 electoral districts, Magyar's party won. Within the counties, the relative dominance of Fidesz was more traceable: they won in each of the 19 counties, and their winning margin fluctuated between 27.67% (in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county) and 9.29% (in Pest county). Overall, there were 60 municipalities where Tisza received more votes than the governing party (Bódi and Kovalcsik, 2024), which must not be overstated, given that there are over 3,000 municipalities in the country. Interestingly, while OH came in second place in 17 of the 19 counties in the municipal elections, their vote share for the EP elections per county was much lower. Yet, compared to the party's 2019 results, they managed to double their vote share in every settlement size category.

Initial studies on the demographic composition of Fidesz voters have started to emerge. One analysis reveals a clear pattern: the lower the percentage of high school graduates in a municipality, the higher the vote share for Fidesz (Hajdu, 2024). This correlation between education level and support for the governing party is deeply rooted in broader socioeconomic conditions: areas with lower educational attainment typically have lower wages, leading to greater reliance on welfare programs. Another poll highlighted that 63% of Fidesz voters are aged 50 or older, compared to just 29% of Tisza voters in the same age group (Propeller, 2024). Additionally, 34% of Fidesz voters are 65 or older, indicating that a significant portion of the voting base is in retirement, reflecting their increased dependence on state support. This is consistent with Orbán's policies, which are consistently favourable towards pensioners.

Given that Fidesz's campaign revolved around the notion of war and peace, it is worth looking into how much this message was successfully distributed. Poll data suggests that the governing party was once again successful in creating a cleavage: while 77% of Fidesz voters would not have sent any assistance to Ukraine, only 29% of Tisza voters would have done the same (Molnár, 2024). This survey, unsurprisingly, also suggested a positive correlation between the level of schooling and readiness to send assistance to Ukraine.



Another poll focused on support for Hungary's EU membership just before the EP elections, aiming to assess the impact of Eurosceptic populist messages on public opinion regarding the country's role in the EU. The results showed that 51% supported and 32% somewhat supported EU membership overall. However, Fidesz voters were the least supportive: only 25% fully supported EU membership, with another 46% somewhat supportive. In contrast, Tisza voters overwhelmingly backed EU membership, with 83% fully supportive and 13% somewhat supportive (Király, 2024). The same poll also asked about the most pressing issues facing the EU. Unsurprisingly, given the campaign context, 65% of respondents identified the war as the most serious issue, overshadowing concerns like migration, climate change, economic disparities among member states, and an ageing population. Regarding migration, 65% of Fidesz voters saw migration into Hungary as a significant problem, while 81% of Tisza voters viewed emigration from Hungary as a more significant issue.

While no new polls have been conducted on public views regarding migration or gender – the other two main campaign themes of Fidesz – a 2022 poll revealed that Fidesz voters rated the seriousness of these issues at 4.4 and 4.0 on a 1–5 scale, respectively (D. Kovács & Bitá, 2022). These scores were above the national average, indicating that pro-government voters were more sensitive to these messages.

Overall, the data suggests that Fidesz voters tend to be older, less educated and rural residents. They are also more receptive to Eurosceptic rhetoric and resonate more strongly with issues related to migration, gender and the war in Ukraine.

Conclusion and discussion

Despite the electoral success of Fidesz, this victory was essentially pyrrhic. Not only did the party record its worst performance in the history of EP elections in Hungary, but it only secured its 'victory' at great cost (money spent on social media, billboards, and the like) and ostensibly with a massive mobilization campaign. In comparison, Tisza did not spend much on social media, had no billboards, and lacked any mobilization strategy given the early phase of its party building (the party was effectively created a couple of months before the EP elections). Furthermore, despite one of the most significant victories across the EU, Orbán's party faced the challenge of allying with others on the European scene. Initially, the governing parties strived to join the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group led by Italy's prime minister, Georgia Meloni. Ultimately, Orbán rejected this

option because he did not want to sit with the anti-Hungarian Romanian party, Alliance for the Unity of Romanians. Additionally, there was a cleavage on the Russia–Ukraine War: not only Meloni and Jarosław Kaczyński but also smaller members of the ECR from Finland, Latvia and Lithuania, held diametrically opposed views to Orbán’s on the matter. Most of these parties overwhelmingly supported financial assistance to Ukraine.

After weeks of negotiations, Orbán succeeded in forming a new coalition based on the former Identity and Democracy group, initially with the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Czech ANO, which was ultimately led by the French National Rally (RN). Although the new Patriots for Europe (PpE) group is the third-largest faction in the EP, it could not secure any significant positions, and thus, Fidesz’s political isolation continues.

Little about the party’s objectives is known: a smaller European Parliament and correspondingly greater sovereignty for member states, a revision of the European Green Deal, and a more robust fight against illegal migration. Given that Hungary assumed the six-month rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union in July 2024, Fidesz is expected to pursue these objectives by putting them on the EU agenda. The extent to which Hungary can deliver on Fidesz’s objectives is yet another question, although Orbán’s international diplomatic meetings in the first weeks of July 2024 signalled his dedication to focusing on international matters. It is worth mentioning that Magyar’s Tisza has joined the European People’s Party (EPP). As a result, KDNP, Fidesz’s coalition partner, which remained in the EPP after Fidesz left the centre-right bloc in 2021, announced that they would also leave the EPP.

The far-right OH joined a new faction led by the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), whose leader visited his Hungarian counterpart, László Torockai, before the election. The Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) only has 25 MEPs, so their influence, along with that of OH, remains marginal.

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