

# Hungary's Over-powerful Government Party and the Desperate Opposition

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This paper focuses on Hungary's illiberal regimes from the perspective of the opposition – a perspective we believe has been under-scrutinized so far. It argues that in order to understand the regime's success it is crucial to explain why opposition parties have been unable to offer a credible alternative. The paper argues that the opposition is in a trap with three unfavourable factors mutually strengthening each other and undermining its ability for success. They are (1) the cartel party system; (2) the weak social embeddedness of opposition parties; and (3) lack of their presence in local politics. At the same time, we also point out that the rise of a tiny joke-party's success (The Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party) highlights that these obstacles can be overcome even with very limited resources. Nevertheless, it is still unclear if the Dog Party's innovative approach to doing politics could be 'institutionalized' – i.e. if it offers a feasible model strategy for opposition parties – or it is only an efficient way of mocking and criticizing how the political system operates.

## 1. Introduction

Following the general election of 2018, close to a hundred thousand citizens went to the streets in Budapest to demonstrate their anger with the results, because the ruling party attained a two thirds majority in Parliament for the third time in a row. Yet, demonstrators expressed their dissatisfaction not only with the election results but also with the opposition parties. Some demanded that would-be opposition MPs should not take their seats in the new Parliament,<sup>1</sup> while others claimed that the opposition was corrupt, seeking to sit comfortably in Parliament and engage in useless debates, while civil society and activists were under increasing pressure from authorities.

1. <https://nepszava.us/nincs-ellenzek-a-parlamentben-csak-arulok-vannak/>

Although there are dozens of recent papers trying to grasp how Hungarian democracy has shifted to illiberalism and turned into what some label as a ‘hybrid’ (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2017) or an ‘authoritarian’ regime (Kornai 2016; Unger 2018; Buzogány 2017), there is hardly any systematic analysis grasping the impotence of the opposition parties and their role in the new ‘illiberal’ political system of Hungary.<sup>2</sup> The contribution of this paper is the study of this issue by focusing on the structural and social background of Hungary’s opposition parties in order to explain the ‘trap’ opposition parties are in. We argue that opposition parties are torn between either participating in the political game, taking their seats in Parliament and accepting state subsidies, meaning that they implicitly acknowledge and legitimize the system, or reject playing by the rules that Fidesz has unilaterally devised following its two-thirds electoral victory. While the latter option would be important to preserve their credibility in citizens’ eyes, it would also mean forfeiting financial resources essential for their existence, as Hungarian parties are tied to state finances rather than funding by party members or sympathizers. In other words, opposition parties exist in a sort of vacuum, with weak ties to citizens, relying on the system for their survival.

Hungary seems a pertinent choice for analysis, not just because the case of Fidesz appears to foreshadow a number of negative tendencies in the Central-Eastern European region, but also because Hungary is the first country within the European Union that Freedom House has downgraded to a ‘partly free system’.<sup>3</sup>

In order to elucidate this issue and to explain the causes of the opposition’s impotence, we will focus on three factors. First, we argue that Hungary has turned into an extreme version of a cartel party system, where opposition parties are co-opted and maintain the system. Second, we point out that opposition parties lack resources, they are weakly embedded in society, and have lost their ability to mobilize citizens. Although today the government and its propaganda machinery are overwhelming, thus mobilization is difficult, civil activists’ actions have demonstrated that opposing the regime is not hopeless. Finally, we turn our attention to local politics and argue that a crucial factor in explaining the opposition’s weakness is the fact that their local institutional and organizational background has collapsed (or has never existed). This is partly the outcome of fundamental legal changes passed by Parliament that had significantly weakened the power of local governments, hampering the chances of opposition parties to ‘build themselves up’ locally. On the other hand, this is the opposition parties’ doing, as they have failed to act locally, existing only as ‘media parties’, with their base in the big cities, particularly Budapest.<sup>4</sup>

2. The fact that in the last elections the leftist parties (MSZP, DK), the green party (LMP) and the far-right party (*Jobbik*) lost more than 90,000 votes, meaning a 3.6% decrease since the 2014 elections (Fidesz secured a 4.4% gain).

3. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-freedom-world-2019-featuring-special-release-united-states>

4. The recent local elections of October 2019 buttress our argument, as in places where the opposition was able to successfully challenge Fidesz, it was frequently by supporting independent candidates without close party affiliations. Also, the overwhelming success of the opposition in Budapest was accompanied by their devastating loss at the level of counties and smaller towns.

By focusing on the opposition, we do not suggest that the issues almost customarily enumerated as the causes of Fidesz's success are not important, such as rigging the electoral system, the bias that all institutions (ranging from the media to the courts) show towards the government, the governing party's manoeuvring skills, the government's sinister methods in muzzling the intelligentsia, or the propaganda actions (so-called 'national consultations') regularly commanded by the government have not played a crucial role in the success of Orban's illiberal regime. Nevertheless, we contend that neglecting the role the opposition plays in maintaining the regime – in many ways inadvertently – is a mistake. It is not only an analytical mistake in understanding the nature of the regime, but it is also failing to take the opportunity to grasp how the illiberal regime could possibly be dismantled and the regime challenged.

Following our explanation of the factors responsible for the opposition's impotence, we will add a case study on a relatively new small Hungarian party, the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (*Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya* párt, which we will refer to as the Dog Party). We believe introducing this party is extremely important, because with its actions not only does it aim to challenge Fidesz, but also highlights the problems and deficiencies of all opposition parties. For example, the party's decision to have its speaker address Parliament dressed as a chicken during the time allotted for the party in the election campaign, and only repeating the word 'kotkodach' (the sound a chicken makes) was a way to criticize the party system's cartelization (with other parties accepting the rules of the game, but not the Dog Party).

The structure of our paper follows the three factors outlined above. First, we discuss why Hungary shows characteristics of a cartel party system. Although this issue has been discussed in the literature (e.g. van Biezen and Kopecky 2017), we believe we need to revisit it as it explains the credibility crisis opposition parties face, which is partly responsible for their difficulty in mobilizing citizens and obtaining the necessary resources (both financial and human resources in terms of supporters and activists), issues we discuss in the second section. Finally, in the third section of the paper, we turn our discussion to Hungary's mock party, the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party, because it offers an example of how despite all odds it may be possible to break the logic of the regime by innovative political techniques that address citizens and at the same time preserve a party's credibility.

## **2. The Opposition in a Cartel Party System**

After the 2010 election, Fidesz introduced changes into the working of the Hungarian political system. In the name of the 'system of national cooperation' as the Prime minister calls the reformed political system, they enacted a new constitution (Batory 2016; Majtényi *et al.* 2019; Várnagy and Ilonszki 2017), centralized the media (Polyák 2019), and vehemently attacked the civil sphere (Kövér 2015). Most of these changes have been launched without consultation and without considering the critiques of the opposition parties and civil organizations.

In consolidated liberal democracies, opposition parties have the clear role to emphasize and remedy the government's weaknesses. Their role is to criticize the government, 'to exercise control and appear in parliament as a challenger that provides an alternative to the government in political and policy terms' (De Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018, 2.) In a democratic system built on competition, the government's accountability and responsibility are self-evident (Schmitter and Karl 1991), and the opposition's role is also obvious: guaranteeing the competition of different ideas, values and interests shared by different sections of society. Furthermore, as in every democratic system the government must be responsible and accountable, between two elections it is the opposition parties that confront the government with their criticisms.

In non-democratic systems, however, the opposition's role is far from obvious. In many contemporary non-democratic systems, we find opposition parties running in the elections and sitting in the legislation. This shows that the new non-democratic regimes, whether we call them 'hybrid regimes' (Bogaards 2009), 'competitive authoritarian hybrid regimes' (Levitsky and Way 2010), or 'electoral autocracy' (Schedler 2013), enable opposition forces to function. All these systems strongly rely on the legitimacy that the facade of a quasi-functioning opposition provides them with. Whether it is a democracy or not, except for closed (Schedler 2013) or full autocracies (Levitsky and Way 2010), there is always some kind of organized political opposition, and the state of the opposition defines the political system just as much as the regime does.

We start our analysis by assuming that the notion of the cartel party (Katz and Mair 1995, 2009) offers a fitting starting point for capturing what has been taking place in Hungary and how the illiberal regime has managed to solidify its power. According to Katz and Mair (1995, p. 22), in a cartel party system, '[d]emocracy becomes a means of achieving social stability rather than social change'. Although, rhetorically, opposition parties are fighting against the illiberal regime – and if they did this successfully, they would happily take over power – in practice, given that they are dependent on the resources the existing setup offers them, and as they have lost their direct contact with society, they are not functioning as a 'true opposition'. By saying this, as we will explain, we do not claim that all opposition actors are co-opted – many of them are probably honest in their struggle to challenge the regime – however, they are hardly seen as a credible alternative.

Hungary is not the only country in the Central-Eastern European region characterized by cartelization (for Poland, see Jasiewicz 2007, and for Romania see Gherghina 2016). We argue, however, that cartelization in Hungary has induced a highly vulnerable democracy. Cartel parties have three main characteristics: financially, they strongly depend on the state, they have lost contact with civil society, and they are professionalized political organizations. Comparing cartels with other party formations (e.g. catch-all, mass and elite parties), one of the most visible differences is that cartel parties heavily rely on state subsidies. Most of their income comes directly from the state budget, such as annual party finance subsidies or campaign finance contributions or, in some countries, free access to public services (e.g. the post, the media and city halls). This situation is partly due to decreasing party membership (who could serve as activists, membership-fee payers, and regular donors for

the party), and the growing relevance of professional (US-style, marketing-based), but very costly campaigns. Another important feature of cartel parties is that politics is gradually becoming the job of professional 'life-long' politicians. Moreover, parties lose their traditional direct contact with society, membership is becoming weaker with the 'distinction between members and non-members blurred' (Katz and Mair 1995, 18), and with outsiders (e.g. intellectuals and journalists) occasionally having a stronger influence on decision-making than the official decision-making bodies of the party organization.

The existence of a cartel party system cannot be explained simply by the opposition politicians' weaknesses and mistakes, as it reflects the incentives and constraints built into the electoral and representational system. Since the 2010 election (when it gained a two-thirds majority in Parliament), Fidesz has introduced changes to the Hungarian political system – along with the creation of a new constitution – that tend to push Hungarian politics towards a cartel-party system. Although we believe this does not predestine opposition parties to follow the logic of the new rules – as our case study of the Dog Party will show – it has created a trap that is difficult for opposition parties to overcome.

First, the trap is related to participation in politics along the lines provided by the system Fidesz has created. Mainstream opposition parties face the challenging dilemma: by taking part in the elections and taking the few seats they manage to secure in Parliament, they end up providing legitimacy to the regime they harshly criticize. Playing the game along the logic Fidesz dictates, unavoidably weakens their credibility and limits their chances to grow and gain supporters. This is so not only because they seem co-opted, but also because they appear impotent as, with the two-thirds Fidesz dominance, they cannot push through Parliament their agendas in any issue. An alternative strategy would be abandoning the institutional frames and spheres of national politics (elections, parliament), and recognizing that if they accept them, they provide legitimacy to the Fidesz-created political system.

The new electoral system, together with the related rules of electoral procedures and campaign finance, has strengthened – in fact, invited – the cartelisation of the Hungarian party system, although such tendencies had already existed before. There is abundant literature on the biased and manipulative political situation brought about by the new electoral law.<sup>5</sup> As Papp and Zorigt (2018, 5) show, these 'changes

5. Even though one may argue that modifications of the electoral law were necessary (Várnagy and Ilonszki 2017), its actual content and the process through which it was pushed through Parliament is heavily debated. The most frequently emphasized characteristics of the new electoral system are: (1) the redrawing of constituencies is not optimized for fair competition, and the delimitation process lacks basic safeguards (European Commission for Democracy through Law – Venice Commission Opinion 2012; OSCE Report 2014; Tóka 2014; Várnagy and Ilonszki 2017; Bogaards 2018). (2) State funding depends on the number of candidates in single-member districts (Várnagy and Ilonszki 2017). (3) According to the new law, elections are conducted in one round, replacing the formerly used two-round system, where the second round was held 10–14 days after the first. (4) The mixed system has been modified: while before 2010 seats distributed on a proportional basis were in the majority (210 of 386), the new electoral law changed this ratio and, since 2011, 106 of the 199 seats belong to the redistricted single member district constituencies.

in the electoral rules alter the logic of political competition'. As a result of the majoritarian, single-round system, strategic cooperation between parties expects them to make strategic alliances prior to elections at a time when the odds are not yet known for the actors (Várnagy and Ilonszki 2017, 11). Nevertheless, the fact that the amount of public finance a party receives is based on the number of its candidates encourages opposition parties to have many candidates, thereby forcing them to compete not only against Fidesz, but also against one another. That is, opposition parties are given more money by the state if they do not form alliances; however, the trap is that if they play alone, they are unable to win.

The new logic of the political system offers two possible alternatives for opposition parties: either cooperation between opposition parties or running alone. Both alternatives could be easily interpreted as a betrayal of citizens. The first option, cooperation, may seem to betray people because parties give up their ideological backgrounds: for example, liberals cooperating with the extreme right may feel that they are being opportunistic, abandoning their values. The second option, running alone, could also invite criticism, because citizens may feel that opposition parties did not team up and did not try the only way that could have offered a chance to beat the Fidesz's candidates. Thus, opposition parties are in a lose–lose situation.

### 3. Opposition Parties Poorly Anchored in Society

In scrutinizing the weaknesses of the opposition, we turn to the question of opposition parties' resources and embeddedness. First, we focus on the lack of resources in terms of party finances and point out that opposition parties receive very limited funds directly from citizens, which makes them dependent on the state. Second, we turn to resources in terms of supporters and activists and the lack of links between opposition parties and civil society. Finally, we discuss the weak embeddedness of opposition parties into local level politics, particularly outside Budapest, which undermines their capacity to compete effectively in national elections.

#### 3.1. *Financing of Hungarian Parties*<sup>6</sup>

For their finances, Hungarian opposition parties rely predominantly on the state. Even if there are occasional contributions by citizens, they tend to come from individuals tied to the parties – e.g. representatives of the party in the European Parliament. As a result, parties operate somewhat like enterprises financed by their 'managers'. Table 1 shows that Hungarian parties receive most of their income from the state budget, whether it is a year of parliamentary elections or not. The exceptions are the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), which sold its headquarter building in 2016, adding more than €3 million to its income, and the Democratic Coalition (DK), with a mysterious income (more than €245,000) in 2017, categorized as

6. In presenting the parties' financial situation, we have updated the 'Political Party Database Project' (Webb and Keith 2017) dataset with data from party reports in 2014–2017.

**Table 1.** Annual income of parties in 2014–2017, in thousand euros<sup>7</sup>.

	Annual income from state budget	Annual income from citizens' donations	Small donations (>€1500)	Big donations (<€1500)	Ratio of state donation to the whole party income (%)	Ratio of citizens' donations to the whole party income (%)
2014 <sup>8</sup>						
Fidesz	4783.8	1278.9	1082.1	196.7	54.05	14.45
Jobbik	3279.7	128.1	91.0	37.2	95.61	3.73
MSZP	2525.8	537.2	375.6	161.7	66	14.44
LMP	2772.7	32.9	20.3	12.6	90.39	1.07
DK	523.7	121.9	58.6	63.3	71.42	16.62
2015						
Fidesz	2709.2	174.5	154.1	20.3	80.90	5.20
Jobbik	1470.5	187.1	129.3	57.8	87.34	11.11
MSZP	1319.7	330.2	202.6	127.6	55.14	13.79
LMP	536.8	50.7	30.1	20.6	86.79	8.19
DK	407.9	92.3	74.2	18.1	64.27	14.53
2016						
Fidesz	2709.2	144.5	109.1	35.4	80.86	4.31
Jobbik	1470.5	286.3	253.4	32.9	82.66	16.09
MSZP	1319.7	349.1	197.9	151.1	26.28	6.95
LMP	536.8	50.9	37.9	13.0	89.12	8.45
DK	407.9	108.1	94.2	13.8	67.35	17.84
2017						
Fidesz	2709.3	149.9	130.7	19.2	55.79	3.08
Jobbik	1470.5	425.6	323.8	101.8	66.19	19.15
MSZP	1310.2	340.6	193.7	146.9	74.69	19.41
LMP	536.8	67.5	44.0	23.5	87.02	10.93
DK	407.9	100.1	76.7	23.4	49.00	12.02

'miscellaneous' and amounting to almost 30% of its annual income. If we look at parties' funds from membership fees, we find that, with the exception of Fidesz, Hungarian parties cannot rely on regularly paid membership fees. While in 2014–2017, Fidesz received an annual €460,000 to €670,000, even MSZP, the party with the second highest amount, received only €61,000 a year, meaning a substantial sevenfold difference.

Finally, we look at party donations. Paradoxically, the so-called anti-establishment parties (LMP and Jobbik), which started out as social movements, could reasonably

7. All data are from the official reports disclosed by the parties in the given years. The reports are available on the parties' websites, and parties have to publish them in the official state journal (*Hungarian Gazette*).

8. In the year of parliamentary elections, the parties have more income, they receive both their share of the annual party finance budget and also the campaign finance allowance. The former is based mainly on the result of the list votes cast for the party in the last parliamentary elections, while the latter is based on the number of the party's candidates in single-member districts (the more candidates you have, the more money you get).

be expected to have deep social roots and ties to citizens, yet have the lowest income from private donations. It is even stranger that the big donors (giving more than €1500 per donation) are their national leaders and members of the Hungarian and European Parliaments. Thus, unlike in Western Europe and the US, we do not find such ‘outsiders’ among the donors as entrepreneurs, artists, and, generally, members of the high society. Our results buttress previous studies that Central-Eastern European countries depend more on the state than old democracies in Western Europe (Kopecký 2006; van Biezen and Kopecký 2017). With Central-Eastern European parties building politics from top-down rather than bottom-up, Hungary is obviously no exception.

### 3.2. *Opposition Parties and Civil Movements/Civil Society*

According to the literature on parties and civil society running in democratic political systems, while civil organizations and social movements may cooperate with parties and ‘stabilize their electoral support’ (Poguntke 2002, 44; Goldstone 2003, 8), they may also keep parties under pressure and force them to represent disregarded demands (Hutter *et al.* 2018). Thus, relations between opposition parties and civil organizations or social movements are not straightforward; nevertheless, dense relations to the civil sphere are considered as political parties’ resources (Schwartz 2010) or social capital (Uslaner 2006).<sup>9</sup>

For years the relationship between civil society and political parties in Hungary was ambiguous. Probably one of the best indicators that shows their separation was demonstration organizers’ recurrent requests to participants not to bring along party symbols, i.e. ‘parties should not come, as we do not want to protest under party banners’.<sup>10</sup> For example, organizers of a student demonstration against planned education reform emphasized that education is a ‘common cause’ and should remain independent of parties.<sup>11</sup> Thus, even when party politicians did join protests, they frequently stated – or were expected to state – that they were taking part as ‘ordinary citizens’ rather than ‘party members’.<sup>12</sup> Also, it is highly informative that one of the most significant crowds mobilized against the government was on the issue of a proposed new tax on internet services. According to research among Facebook users, two-thirds of protest participants had very weak party preferences or none at all.<sup>13</sup>

9. For an elaborate review of the social movement-party relationship, see Goldstone (2003); Schwartz 2010; Hutter *et al.* (2018).

10. <https://168ora.hu/itthon/meghekkellhetia-civil-vilag-a-partokat-9811>

11. <https://fuhu.hu/azonnali-kovetelesekkel-mennek-diakok-parlamenthez-penteken/>

12. see the 2015 protest of nurses: <http://nol.hu/belfold/a-normafanal-gyaszolnak-az-apolok-1530283>

13. [https://index.hu/belfold/2014/11/06/mit\\_mond\\_a\\_facebook\\_a\\_netado\\_elleni\\_tuntetes\\_resztveoirol/](https://index.hu/belfold/2014/11/06/mit_mond_a_facebook_a_netado_elleni_tuntetes_resztveoirol/)



In order to get a better understanding of links between opposition parties and civil organizations, we have looked at surveys of citizens' party preferences that include information about their membership in civil society organizations.<sup>14</sup> The survey results offer valuable insights into the way parties are embedded in civil society groups. We expected to find opposition parties to be highly preferred to Fidesz among civil activists (except for religious organizations – Susánszky *et al.* 2016), as well as overwhelming support for opposition parties among members of human rights organizations – given the harsh campaign of the government against them.<sup>15</sup> Among citizens who were non-members in civil organizations, Fidesz was clearly the most preferred party (the mean of the attractiveness scale being positive), yet if we asked those who were members of civil organizations, the opposition parties were more preferred except for religious organizations, where members strongly preferred Fidesz over any other party (as we had expected), and also for cultural organizations (which we had not expected), although here support for Fidesz was not so spectacular.<sup>16</sup> This would suggest that supporters of civil organizations offer a resource for opposition parties to build on. Yet, if we investigate details, the picture is not so promising (see Table 2). As we can observe, the support for various opposition parties is extremely split. Thus, while Jobbik is supported by those belonging to sports organizations, other opposition parties are relatively disliked by these citizens, meaning that the explicit support of a cause by one opposition party may discourage supporters of other opposition parties. If this split was only between Jobbik (for a long time regarded as an extreme right party) and parties relatively on the left in politics (MSZP and DK), this would be natural. Yet, if we look at the table carefully, what we find is that among those belonging to environmentalist organizations not only Jobbik but also LMP is disliked, consequently this is not a clear left–right divide. This makes joint mobilization by opposition parties extremely difficult, even if Jobbik is excluded from an event.

Furthermore, the finding that the green party, LMP is disliked by environmentalist organizations is all the more surprising because the party's original identity was

14. Our data are from the last wave of the Hungarian Election Panel Study 2018 (HELPS 2018) conducted two months after the 2018 parliamentary elections. Participation, Representation, Partisanship. Hungarian Election Study 2018. NKFI – 119603. Principal investigator: Szabó, Andrea.

Party preferences were measured on a seven-point scale where –3 means very unattractive, 0 means a neutral position, and +3 means very attractive. We also asked our respondents about their memberships in various types of civil organizations. The list contained the following: (1) sports clubs and outdoor activities (e.g. tourist, angler associations); (2) high school clubs and student organizations; (3) cultural associations (e.g. focusing on dance, theatre); (4) human rights movements and civil organizations; (5) religious groups; (6) charity organizations; (7) environmentalist associations, and movements; (8) trade unions.

15. These results are quite obvious for us, since the government has been pursuing a campaign against human rights groups and watchdog organizations, and police have investigated several civil organizations (BTI report cited by Bogaards 2018, 6). In a speech, the prime minister called civil organizations 'foreign agents', which epitomizes the mechanism of 'enemy construction', a basic element that the political system is based on (Kopper *et al.*, 2017).

16. Fidesz and the government have especially strong relations with the Catholic Churches (Kövér 2015), and the success of pro-government rallies hinges on religious civil organizations (Susánszky *et al.* 2016).

**Table 2.** Party preferences across civil organizations.

Civil organization		N	Fidesz	DK	MSZP	LMP	Jobbik
Sport	Member	63	-0.3988	-0.5007	-0.5598*	-0.6570	0.4359*
	Non-member	1002	0.1690	-0.9906	-0.9007	-0.9038	-0.5360
Culture	Member	82	-0.1861	-0.8260	-0.4116*	-0.6569	-0.2742
	Non-member	1064	0.1641	-0.9712	-0.9159	-0.9082	-0.4933
Student	Member	21	0.1257	-0.0395	-0.2459	0.2911*	-0.4001
	Non-member	1043	0.1357	-0.9813	-0.8945	-0.9137	-0.4806
Religious	Member	69	1.1554*	-1.0500	-0.8298	-1.0596	-0.1750
	Non-member	996	0.0650	-0.9557	-0.8848	-0.8773	-0.5001
Human Rights	Member	35	-0.9066*	0.2034*	0.2487*	-0.0671*	-1.0108
	Non-member	1029	0.1741	-1.0021	-0.9226	-0.9192	-0.4644
Charity	Member	60	-0.0531	-0.3892	0.0125*	-0.3604*	-0.6866
	Non-member	1005	0.1466	-0.9963	-0.9381	-0.9212	-0.4665
Environmentalist	Member	51	-0.8842*	0.1074*	0.2672*	-0.3259	-0.5127
	Non-member	1014	0.1843	-1.0145	-0.9398	-0.9178	-0.4773
Trade Union	Member	34	0.0970	0.0338*	-0.1421*	-0.6555	-1.3498
	Non-member	1030	0.1399	-0.9947	-0.9067	-0.8989	-0.4536
Total		1066	0.1337	-0.9619	-0.8819	-0.8893	-0.4823

based on being foremost a pro-environment organization. Yet, the fact that it is disliked by members of environmental groups suggests that it has no real civil base to rely upon (at least not in the organization that one would think of as its natural background).

While, as expected, members of human rights organizations prefer opposition parties, contrary to our expectations the support is hardly overwhelming. In addition, if we look at charity organizations and trade unions, what we find is that the two parties on the left (DK and MSZP), which might be natural allies, could not build on the unanimous support of these organizations' members: in fact, it is among trade union members that Fidesz scores the highest attractiveness value.

These results reflect that even though opposition parties are more attractive for people in civil organizations, this is not a strong base to build upon. In addition, these examples explain why protest organizers try to remain independent: they do not want their issues to be co-opted by political parties, while they also feel that parties have discredited themselves in the eye of citizens, thus teaming up with them hardly helps them to promote their goals. Yet, without close and strong cooperation between the civil sphere and political parties, challenging the regime seems extremely difficult. Perhaps we saw the beginning of something new following the April 2018 elections, as, during the fall, opposition parties supported civil candidates and participated in several demonstrations jointly with civil society groups.<sup>17</sup>

17. For example: <https://infostart.hu/belfold/2018/12/16/ujabb-tuntetes-konygaz-es-fustgranatok-budapesten>

### **3.3. Opposition Parties – Local Level, Subnational Politics**

The success of parties at the national level tends to be closely related to their performance on the local level. Local presence is an asset without which parties cannot survive in the long run. It may happen that a newly born party can achieve relative success in the short term, but this may easily evaporate if the party does not make a strong effort to build up its organizational background (Tavits 2012; Gherghina 2014). The parties' performance in local elections matters not only from a local perspective, but also for their possible survival (Cyr 2016). As Obert and Müller stress, local political success is 'a major factor that helps political parties to sustain themselves in the electoral arena' (Obert and Müller 2017, 414).

Since the collapse of the Socialist Party (MSZP) in 2006, local elections have been dominated by Fidesz. In 2006, Fidesz received 49% of the votes, 51% in 2014, and the highest percentage of 56.1% in 2010. With the exception of the far-right, whose backing rose from 14 to 17.1% between 2010 and 2014, other parties lost support, or had to share their electorate with newcomer parties: socialists received 23.2% in 2010, but their share decreased to 15.3% by 2014, as their former voters had joined other opposition parties or proto-parties.<sup>18</sup> Since 2010, the number of mayors and local representatives of opposition parties has dramatically decreased: while, before 2006, at least one-third of the big-city mayors were from opposition parties, in 2010 only one mayor, and in 2014 two mayors were from one of the opposition parties in the country's 23 biggest cities.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the majority of opposition parties are unable to run or to secure seats in county assemblies: of the seven opposition parties represented in Parliament between 2010 and 2018, only two (MSZP and Jobbik, the ones with nationwide organizations) won representation in all the 19 county assemblies and in Budapest, while others were able to secure seats only in a few or none of the county assemblies. It is even more disappointing that at times they were unable even to nominate a candidate list, due to the lack of preliminary support that the electoral law requires. Also, opposition parties were unable to delegate electoral observers to more than half of the election precincts in the 2016 referendum (there was a total of around 10,000 precincts in the whole country), and to one third in the 2018 general elections, which clearly shows how weakly embedded they are outside Budapest.

Small, centre parties had a close to zero chance of winning seats running alone; their successfully elected mayors were almost always joint candidates with MSZP and its fragment party DK. Teaming up with these tiny parties – despite their weakness – was nevertheless reasonable for MSZP, because they had a few well-known leaders who received media attention. In fact, one could argue that many of the small parties are proto parties in the sense that they are organized around a few well-known

18. Aggregate data based on the analyses of the Republikon Institute, <http://republikon.hu/media/17971/20101005.pdf> and [http://republikon.hu/media/18106/onkval\\_2014\\_v2.pdf](http://republikon.hu/media/18106/onkval_2014_v2.pdf).

19. The fact that in the latest 2019 local elections the opposition managed to win in a number of big cities (although losing in county assemblies) is interpreted by many as the sign of hope for future political change.

politicians, but they lack a countrywide organizational network and are therefore stuck to some bigger cities, foremost to Budapest.

The lack of local presence leads to what we could call ‘subnational electoral competitiveness’: parties focus on those electoral districts where they have some measurable support, local office and local representation, but pay no attention to the remaining areas. While this is reasonable from the perspective of being locally successful in these few places, it has negative implications in national elections, as in many localities they remain unknown to citizens. In addition, this need to find allies and to enter into deals about potentially successful coalitions and possibly winnable seats means that opposition parties are required to spend most of their time negotiating cooperation and joint candidacies in districts and cities where they believe Fidesz could be defeated, rather than discussing their programmes and policy proposals. This again is something citizens may dislike, as it does not give the impression that opposition parties are for them. Furthermore, the need to cooperate creates another trap for opposition parties because it again undermines their chances of creating a local identity. Running with other parties means that citizens cannot ‘see’ these parties, and their chances of building up their nationwide support networks is greatly limited. Furthermore, the need to cooperate puts pressure on supporters locally as they are asked to campaign for a joint candidate who may not be the best compromise their party could make, and is hardly the preferred person they would wholeheartedly campaign for.

#### 4. The Dog Party’s Innovative Party Strategies

The emergence and growing popularity of MKKP, the *Two-Tailed Dog Party*, has been one of the most remarkable surprises in recent years. The rise of the Dog Party is strongly connected to the ever-growing governmental propaganda since 2015 directed against asylum seekers, migrants, the EU, and even against the UN, the propaganda that the Dog Party has challenged with irony and sarcasm. Although the party was widely known from 2010 onwards, only in 2014 did it apply for official registration, when it finally decided to run in the local elections.<sup>20</sup>

As the name indicates, originally the Dog Party was but a joke party. Nevertheless, as Hungarian politics has been increasingly shifting to the realm of the absurd, it has re-defined itself as a genuine political party. In contrast to other opposition parties, it has opted for a strategy that makes it markedly different. First, it tries to act on the local level, and second, maintaining its radically sarcastic way of doing politics, it manages to preserve its credibility in its supporters’ eyes. Thus, we argue that its jokes are not self-serving, but are the means to demonstrate that the Dog Party could not be co-opted by the regime.

20. As the registration process took too long, and the party got the official report of its registration in the very last minutes of the nomination period of local elections, they could not finally run in the elections.

The 'game-changing' moment for the party came in the summer of 2015, as no other party had reacted to the government's ongoing racist, and xenophobic campaign against asylum seekers and migrants. It was at that point that the Dog Party, jointly with the blog called '*Vastagbőr*' (literally: Thick Skin) decided to launch a campaign against the governmental propaganda. Having no financial background, they announced that they would collect donations, with a fundraising goal of €9190. In the two weeks of this fundraising campaign, they managed to collect more than €91,900, ten times as much as the planned amount. On another occasion, when they were asking for funds to challenge the government's 'quota-referendum' campaign, the party was again donated more than €104,000.

Since 1989, no other party has been able to collect such amounts of money in such a short time. While one may argue that the first successful fundraising campaign could be explained by its uniqueness, the second fruitful one in 2016 was already the outcome of the party's 2015 work and achievements.

One could argue that supporters paid to see the government ridiculed, and that the classical critique against resistance by laughter applies. Or, to put it another way, making fun of authority is not a form of political protest in an authoritarian system but, paradoxically, it is giving citizens an alibi not to take any further action. In fact, critics say that making fun of the regime 'reveals not the powerless nakedness of the authority – but the fact of authority's naked power' (Billig 2005, 213).

We believe, however, that this interpretation does not capture what the Dog Party's campaign was about. In our understanding, the Dog Party and its ironic attitude to authority projected it as a credible actor in no way co-opted by the regime. When, during the election campaign, the Dog Party's member of parliament, in the time allotted to each party running in the election, was just squawking like a parrot (dressed like a chicken, repeating the word 'kotkodach', imitating the sound chickens make),<sup>21</sup> this was a way of declaring that the established way of doing politics, and the circus Parliament had turned into was unacceptable for them. Thus, humour was a strong critique of the regime and of all those co-opted by it, but it was also a declaration of the Dog Party's autonomy, turning fun into a crucial resource for them to preserve their credibility.

When it comes to the ideological platform and politics, the Dog Party has no strict written statements, but it promotes and works for participatory democracy, active citizenship and inclusive society. Its attitude to politics is very different from that of ordinary parties. Whatever it does, it does mainly in public spaces at the local level. One of its most famous actions was the so-called 'four colour painting'.<sup>22</sup> During this campaign, activists painted over the cracked sidewalks in four colours (blue, yellow, green and red). These paintings were to warn authorities that some renovation would be necessary, but they were also signalling to locals that there was a Dog Party activists' group in town.

21. <https://www.euronews.com/2018/03/12/could-a-man-in-a-chicken-costume-be-voted-into-the-hungarian-parliament->

22. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian\\_Two-tailed\\_Dog\\_Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_Two-tailed_Dog_Party)

During the campaign of the 2018 parliamentary elections, rather than financing large nation-wide billboard campaigns and other expensive advertisements (as parties usually do), the Dog Party decided to spend its state subsidies on addressing local problems. Among other things, it renovated a dilapidated bus stop for passengers in a small village; repaired a bicycle route, and operated a night bus for a month to a city suburb that badly needed this service. All these were typical grass-roots actions, where the aim was to mobilize citizens, while also to demonstrate that the money the party received would be used for the good of citizens rather than for running the party itself.

In sum, the Dog Party follows a type of politics that is contrary to what other parties do. First, by not depending on state subsidies; second by having no bureaucratic, professionalized and institutionalized organization; third by actively building relations with local communities. In this way, the Dog Party manages not only to overcome problems of credibility, but also manages to build its basis on the local level. Probably, for successfully challenging the regime, any new opposition party will invariably have to meet these two preconditions: building and maintaining credibility, and being embedded in society with a local level presence.

## 5. Conclusion

We have argued that, parallel to analysing how the illiberal regime of Hungary solidifies its grip on power by rewriting the legal system and taking control over information, it is extremely important to investigate why the opposition is unable to challenge it and why many citizens think that Hungary would need a 'new opposition'. Thus, in order to explain the success of Hungary's illiberal regime, we have geared our study to understanding the impotence of the opposition. Although we have discussed some important properties of the regime, we have done this from the perspective of the opposition. We have been trying to find out how the existing electoral system with its party finances makes it hard to compete, and how it creates some dilemmas and traps that are difficult to overcome. We argue that parties either choose to 'play the game' that Fidesz has created through rewriting the constitution following its two-thirds victory in 2010, or forsake the resources that the system offers them. The latter choice however is made extremely difficult because most of the opposition parties lack essential resources.

We have shown that members of different civil organizations either support Fidesz (religious organizations) or have preferences towards only one opposition party. Thus, opposition parties could not build on the unanimous support of the members of the civil sphere. This split of supporters makes their joint mobilization extremely challenging. Also, we have displayed the lack of opposition parties' nationwide organizational network, which leads us to the conclusion that many of the small parties are proto parties and stuck to some bigger cities, foremost to Budapest.

After elaborating the trap opposition parties have fallen into, we turned our attention to the Dog Party. We argue that the party's sarcasm and irony is crucial for preserving its credibility by demonstrating that it does not allow the system to co-opt it in any way. Furthermore, we believe that not only does the Dog Party do politics differently – in a bottom-up manner – but it also shows us why the current system is absurd and why existing parties – both those in government and in opposition – are inept. They are like a doctor giving a very straightforward diagnosis of the system, while also demonstrating how politics could be done differently.

### Acknowledgements

The study was supported by the FIKP Project at the ELTE University, Budapest. The authors would like to thank to Márton Gerő, Nikos Fokas, Olena Podolian and Sergiu Gherghina for their support and constructive comments on the manuscript.

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