

# **Post-socialist democracy: national judgements and voting patterns on the value of democracy in Hungary**

Researcher: Sara Doczi

Supervisor: Sophie Harbour

## **Abstract**

This study aims to answer how Hungarian voters conceptualise democratic values in electoral decisions, especially in contrast with other issues. Focusing on residents of the town of Győr, a place with shifting power dynamics, this research paper uses seven semi-structured interviews with current or former voters of Fidesz, Hungary's governing party. This study looks at whether awareness of democratic backsliding is a key factor in voter behaviour, or if continued support for Fidesz reflects deliberate prioritisation of other issues elections address, such as the economy, foreign policy, or social issues. Employing thematic analysis on interviews conducted in Hungary with citizens who have voted for Fidesz in at least one election revealed awareness of at least some elements of undemocratic tendencies – such as restrictions on media freedom or constitutional manipulation – these concerns rarely shaped voting intentions directly. Instead, democracy was often perceived as an abstract or secondary issue, overshadowed by more immediate material or identity-based concerns.

## **Introduction and literature review**

Ideals of democratic government were often interpreted as the ultimate dream of countries under the Eastern Bloc in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Freedom and representation were seen as the peak of humanity and society, quickly adopted by more-or-less liberal democratic governments after 1989. Now, merely 35 years after the long-awaited adaptation of democracies in the region, countries seem to be failing on multiple indices of democracy (for example Varieties of Democracy, The Economist Democracy Index). While answers to the question of why this is the case may lie in practicalities of economic instability or complicated global relations, one must also question the reception of the failure to uphold democratic principles. Is electing parties with undemocratic tendencies a deliberate prioritization of other issues by voters? Is it proof that democracy is not as universal of a value as one might have

supposed? Or is the average voter unaware of certain erosions of democracy happening in their country, thus not impacting their vote purely because of ignorance in this set of issues?

This research paper aims to look at how voters in Hungary prioritize or deprioritize certain issues when voting. Specifically, it looks at the way democracy may be viewed as an inherent value, that is, how important voters find a certain political party's dedication to upholding democratic principles, both based on their communication with voters and empirical evidence of democratic or undemocratic practices when in power, looking at the degree to which these factors may affect voters, especially in contrast with other issues (such as the economy or foreign policy).

The research was conducted in the town of Győr, located in Western Hungary with a population of around 130 000 residents. It has had a Fidesz mayor until 2024, when it elected an independent/green mayor. Both of Győr's parliamentary representatives have been Fidesz-affiliated since 2014, with the most recent parliamentary election being in 2022. In the 2024 European Parliamentary Election, the Fidesz-KDNP's coalition list received 40.58% of the votes, while Tisza, the most prominent opposition party, received 36.85%. These recent changes in Győr's election trends may provide a unique opportunity to explore how people's perspectives of certain parties' commitments to democracy affect their voting patterns.<sup>1</sup>

As Hungary's governing party since 2010, Fidesz has been proven to be prone to democratic backsliding and does not necessarily place value on democracy as a principle in its communication. This study therefore limited its participants to voters with current or former affiliation to Fidesz. The Economist's Democracy Index defines Hungary as a *flawed democracy*, with free elections and basic civil liberties being honoured, but having issues, particularly with media freedom or suppression of political opposition. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) describes the elections in 2014 and 2018 as 'free, if not wholly fair', that is, that restricting information with state resources gave Fidesz an electoral advantage. Currently, Fidesz controls around 90% of all media in the country.<sup>2</sup> Public service television channels and radio stations were united in 2011 under the new Media Services and Support Trust Fund (MTVA), with managerial positions being filled with delegates of the Media Council, an organ created by new media regulation passed in 2010, with members being delegated by Fidesz. The transformation of the media landscape after 2010 affected non-public service media outlets as well, with many radio stations losing

broadcasting licenses, such as Tilos Rádió, and being replaced by the increasing broadcasting agreements being given to Catholic and Protestant radio stations. In terms of newspapers, many underwent a transfer to new owners believed to be close to the government, such as leading news sites Origó and Index, and all regional daily newspapers.<sup>3</sup> Fidesz also demonstrates a move away from democratic principles with the growing lack of judicial independence.<sup>4,5</sup> This is made possible by Fidesz's constitution-making two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, where the Fidesz-KDNP coalition holds 135 out of 199 seats, with Fidesz holding 116, and KDNP 19, with a supporting seat from the German minority. Consequently, the party does not require any other party's support to pass changes in the Hungarian constitution (Alaptörvény) or to pass any new laws that serve their interest.

Fidesz's anti-democratic tendencies can also be examined from the vantage point of civil rights and liberties. Fidesz's main external communications strategy is exclusionary populist rhetoric, directed mainly towards the European Union (often simply referred to as Brussels), illegal immigrants, and more recently, the LGBTQ+ community. Campaigns run by the regime often very directly reject these ideas or groups of people, with campaign slogans such as “no gender, no migration, no war.”<sup>6</sup>



Image shared by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on social media platform X on 23 March 2023, with the caption “The [#EUCCO](#) is underway. The Hungarian position is clear and simple: NO MIGRATION! NO GENDER! NO WAR!”<sup>7</sup>

On the 18 March 2025, the National Assembly passed an amendment to the law regulating assembly, which, citing the Child Protection Act, prohibits holding or participating in any gathering where people under the age of 18 may encounter homosexuality or transgenderism. The primary purpose of the amendment to the law was to ban Budapest Pride, further demonstrating very clear exclusionary politics. This amendment is a testament to Fidesz's

disregard for principle tenets of democracy, both in the context of it regulating the right of assembly, as well as limiting civil liberties for minority sexuality groups.<sup>8</sup>

The party's main communication device is the idea that the communities it seeks to exclude have an inherently destructive nature to them that only Fidesz can protect against. In the case of illegal immigrants, that is violence, while in the case of the LGBTQ+ community, Fidesz promises child protection. Leading up to the 2024 European Parliamentary Election, Fidesz based much of its campaign on the idea that leading figures in the European Union, such as Ursula von der Leyen, allied with Fidesz-opposing parties in Hungary were perpetrating and escalating the war in Russia-Ukraine, encouraging citizens to vote for Fidesz to protect peace.



Campaign poster in 2024 displaying opposition leaders in large text that reads 'WAR', and Viktor Orbán in text that reads 'PEACE.'

Most of the academic literature on Fidesz and populism more broadly that aim to answer why populist parties with a tendency of democratic backsliding get re-elected focus on the clash between whether it is due to economic stability or ideological/cultural reasons.<sup>9</sup> While important, it leaves out how voters conceptualize democracy as an inherent value when deciding on how to cast their votes. This research aims to show the intersection of the two issues – how ideals of democracy and dedication to democracy interplay with other factors that may influence, and to what extent is this intersection impacted by unawareness or misinformation by voters. The research further aims to reveal how, regardless of economic and cultural issues' relation to each other, if democracy as an inherent value can be viewed as a separate, third metric that guides voters, or is it something that may only guide the navigation of the tension between economic and cultural policy.

Conversations with participants centred on their reasoning for how they voted in the Parliamentary Election in 2022, the European Parliamentary and Municipal joint Election in 2024, and on their upcoming voting in the Parliamentary Election in 2026. Overall, two metrics guided the line of questioning: (1) the level of awareness citizens have of major parties' commitments to democracy and their tendency to engage in democratic backsliding, looking specifically at Fidesz, (2) the importance they place on commitments to democratic values and evidence for democratic backsliding when voting.

Based on these conversations, the research proposes two hypotheses:

- 1) Participants are aware of recent policies which evidence a change in commitments to democratic values, but they continue to vote for this party as they prioritise other issues more, such as economic or foreign policy.
- 2) Participants are aware of recent policies which evidence a change in commitments to democratic values, but they show no clear articulation of prioritizing other issues over democratic values.
- 3) Participants are unaware of recent policies which evidence a change in commitments to democratic value (due to potential misinformation or lack of information), therefore there is no conscious prioritization or deprioritization of democratic values when voting.

## **Methodology**

This research consisted of 7 semi-structured interviews, recruited through snowball sampling primarily on social media. The selection criteria to be interviewed was to be a resident of Győr, to have voted for Fidesz in at least one election, and to not be holding governmental office. Participants were sent a consent and form that detailed data protection and safeguarding measures in place for the interviews. This consent form was read aloud before each interview. The ages of the participants were 19, 25, 34, 42, 43, 59, and 72, with 4 men and 3 women participating.

Each interview was conducted in Hungarian and lasted about 45 minutes. The interviews were a mix between in-person and online interviews. During the interviews, participants were first asked to disclose and explain their votes in the 2022 Parliamentary Election and the 2024

European Parliamentary and Municipal Joint Election. Following this, they were asked to evaluate their stance on seven issues: economic policy, proximity to the European Union, the war in Russia-Ukraine, change and continuity in the Hungarian constitution and electoral laws, social issues such as LGBTQ+ and women's position in Hungary, and immigration. They were then asked to explain their current voting plans for the upcoming 2026 Parliamentary Election, and whether this was impacted by changes in the Hungarian constitution or election laws. Finally, they were asked to detail how they usually consume news.

Each interview was recorded, and later translated and transcribed full verbatim by software and manually edited for accuracy. They were then analysed through thematic analysis to provide the conclusions of the study.

## **Research findings and discussion**

Out of the seven people interviewed, only four expressed certainties in casting their vote for Fidesz again in 2026. This deviation in participants allowed for the study to encompass both critics and supporters of Fidesz, with the important addition that critics of Fidesz needed to be pushed over a certain threshold, as all participants voted for Fidesz in 2022. The two subsections show that while the evaluation of democracy may be completely or at least marginally different, the way in which democracy is used as a tool to underpin different issues. In other words, while concerns about democracy are never ignored, they are often overshadowed or viewed as secondary to material or identity-based questions.

Due to the small sample size, factors like age, gender and university education made no meaningful correlation with the findings of the study. However, the type of news outlets the participants consumed and its impact on their answers will be discussed in section 3.

### 1) Participants with doubts and concerns

Out of the three participants that expressed no commitment to voting for Fidesz in 2026 due to recent distrust in and concerns about Fidesz, two detailed feeling lost in Hungary's current political landscape with no clear voting plan for the upcoming election, while one participant expressed a strong commitment to voting for Hungary's leading opposition party, Tisza. Tisza

was founded in 2020, but rose to popularity in 2024, becoming the leading opposition party in just three months, after Péter Magyar, former Fidesz party member joined, following a major scandal in February 2024 that led to the resignation of former President of Hungary, Katalin Novák.

When discussing Fidesz's disregard of democratic principles, every member of this group expressed strong concern about changes to the constitution and electoral laws. Multiple participants explained that they felt that *'the playing field isn't fair'* or that Fidesz is *'cheating'*. However, these concerns were not in the context of the 2022 Parliamentary Election, and none of the interviewees in this category claimed that they believed these statements to be true for that election. Moreover, when discussing critiques more broadly, that is, not just in amendments to laws, multiple participants described that they were surprised at first, and that they believed that this was *'unlike'* or *'out of character'* for Orbán. These notions brought forward by participants implies a sense of recency in their problems with the regime, meaning that their judgment significantly shifted post-2022. However, it is important to note that there has been no significant change in Fidesz's politics following their last election win. On the other hand, the opposition landscape underwent a significant change in 2024 with the emergence of the Tisza party. Péter Magyar's anti-Fidesz stance comes from a novel perspective, which is centre-right and Hungary-centric, with a heavy emphasis on critiquing corruption. This new perspective may have been a contributing factor in increasing Fidesz-critical notions in prominently right-wing circles. It is important to note that two of the participants in this group expressed varying degrees of hesitancy on voting for Magyar, however, Magyar's existence may have still contributed to increasing awareness of Fidesz's problems with growing discourse around him and his vocations in crowds previously almost exclusively dominated by support for Fidesz.

It is important to highlight critiques of the regime by participants touched on various issues, most prominently, Fidesz's aggressive communication and an unstable economy. While all participants in this category expressed discomfort with increasing democratic backsliding, none of the participants expressed concern solely on this issue, and the issue was never discussed outside of questions that explicitly prompted this. This implies implicitly that participants deem other critiques of Fidesz more important and more pressing, as those were always their first line of reasoning when asked. This does not mean that they do not find dedication to democracy an important concern as evidenced by their responses to the questions

aimed at these, however, it may suggest that democratic backsliding alone might not be enough to pass a threshold of becoming critical of a party one previously supported. The theme of recency in distrust present in their answers also evidences this claim, as first points of reference were always events post-2022, meaning that there has been a steeper increase in concerns in other issues, while a more stable one in concerns about democracy. Participants often used the theme of democracy as further evidence to support arguments made earlier in the interview, rather than treat the decline in democratic principle as its own separate issue.

## 2) Participants with a commitment to Fidesz

Out of the four participants that expressed a probable vote for Fidesz in 2026, two still voiced some doubts regarding the party, while two had a very strong commitment to it. Interviewees who were more distanced from Fidesz, when asked, admitted to feeling uncomfortable with the anti-democratic tendencies of the party, but found other issues that they felt were more important. Crucially, this does not necessarily implicate an intentional deprioritizing of democracy, as one participant criticised Fidesz on multiple issues, most notably the economy and certain social policies, therefore there is no clear line of prioritization here between the three main themes.

A general theme for the two participants with strong support, that was marginally mentioned in one other interview as well, was the idea that people who vote for or are member of other parties are critiquing changes to the constitution and election laws are '*only voicing these critiques because they lost*' and are merely '*complaining*.' These answers decentre their opinion on Fidesz' dedication to democracy and instead make a value judgement on opposition discourse, that is, these participants are able to answer questions related to democracy as a direct critique of the opposition party and thus in support for Fidesz. In many ways, this echoes the way these questions were 'used' by participants who formed critiques of Fidesz along the interviews. When questions were non-issue-specific, democracy was never discussed, and when it was, due to it being prompted by a question, it strengthened previous reasonings given by interviewees. Once again, democracy was always used as a second line of analysis when looking at Fidesz, in this instance, further proving the argument made by three of these participants that the opposition was unfit to rule. In other ways, we can conceptualize the topic and theme of democracy as a lens through which participants make judgements of certain

parties – in this instance, that being claiming that the opposition is receiving election results in a premature way.

### 3) Unawareness and misinformation

None of the participants demonstrated complete unawareness of at least some measures taken by Fidesz that are not in line with democratic principles. There was a clear correlation between what news outlets one consumed and how uncomfortable they felt with the disregard of democratic principles, with more concerned individuals mentioning Telex, 444 – newspapers that are often openly critical of Fidesz, and Index, owned by Miklós Vaszily, who is close to Fidesz<sup>10</sup>, with Index being a somewhat more neutral page. Participants expressing support often mentioned Mandiner and Origó, newspapers that are very close to the regime. We may make the claim that participants consuming more neutral news proved to be more critical of Fidesz, however, it is important to note that this does not necessarily imply that being informed on democratic backsliding correlates with Fidesz-scepticism. More likely, the combination of critiques from many different aspects of life is needed for the participant to feel distrustful of Fidesz.

## **Conclusions**

This study aimed explore how Hungarian voters, particularly those currently or formerly supporting Fidesz, prioritise democratic values when making electoral choices. Focusing on Győr, it examined whether awareness of democratic backsliding influences voter behaviour or whether continued support for Fidesz reflects a conscious prioritisation of other concerns. The findings indicate that while participants generally recognise elements of democratic erosion, this awareness seldom determines their vote.

Democracy was frequently regarded as secondary to more immediate issues such as the economy, corruption, or social policy. Even participants critical of Fidesz rarely framed democratic decline as their main grievance, instead viewing it as one of several interrelated concerns. This suggests that democracy functions as a background consideration rather than a decisive electoral factor.

The study also revealed how media consumption shape perceptions of democracy. Those engaging with independent or critical outlets expressed stronger concern over undemocratic practices, while others consuming pro-government media often reframed such critiques as politically motivated attacks. Crucially, none of the participants were entirely unaware of democratic decline; rather, their interpretations depended on the narratives through which they understood political developments.

## References

<sup>1</sup>“Election Results – Local Elections 2024, Győr.” *Nemzeti Választási Iroda (National Election Office)*. <https://vtr.valasztas.hu/onk2024/valasztopolgaroknak/varmegyek-telepulesek/varmegyek/08/telepulesek/059?tab=results&filter=representative>.

<sup>2</sup> Marius Dragomir. 2017. “The State of Hungarian Media: Endgame?” *LSE Media Policy Project Blog*, August 29, 2017. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2017/08/29/the-state-of-hungarian-media-endgame/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Media Ownership in Hungary.” *Media Ownership Monitor Europe*. <https://media-ownership.eu/findings/countries/hungary/>.

Bátorfy, Attila, and Ágnes Urbán. 2019. “State Advertising as an Instrument of Transformation of the Media Market in Hungary.” *East European Politics* 36 (1): 44–65.

<sup>4</sup>Hungarian Helsinki Committee. n.d. “Vélemény a legújabb igazságügyi reformról.” <https://helsinki.hu/velemeney-a-leMgujabb-igazsagugyi-reformrol/>.

<sup>5</sup> Kovács, Ágnes. 2021. “Ebben a rendszerben van egy szisztematikus, rendszerszerű család.” *Szabad Európa*, February 17, 2021. <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/ebben-a-rendszerben-van-egy-szisztematikus-rendszeru-csalas-kovacs-agnes-alkotmanyjogasz-a-biroi-fuggetlensegrol/33287996.html>.

<sup>6</sup> “PM Orbán: ‘No Migration, No Gender, No War.’” *About Hungary Blog*. <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/pm-orban-no-migration-no-gender-no-war>

<sup>7</sup> Orbán, Viktor. 2023. “The #EUCO is underway. The Hungarian position is clear and simple: NO MIGRATION! NO GENDER! NO WAR!” *X (formerly Twitter)*, March 23, 2023. [https://x.com/PM\\_ViktorOrban/status/1638904947113615363](https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1638904947113615363)

<sup>8</sup>“Budapest Pride: Viktor Orbán and the Far Right’s Assault on LGBTQ+ Rights.” *The Guardian*, July 1, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/01/budapest-pride-viktor-orban-far-right-lgbtq>.

<sup>9</sup> Scoggins, Bermond. “Identity Politics or Economics? Explaining Voter Support for Hungary’s Illiberal FIDESZ.” *East European Politics and Societies* 36, no. 1 (2022) doi:10.1177/0888325420954535.

<sup>10</sup>Vári, György. 2020. “Index, Bodolai, Szombathy, Indamedia.” *Válasz Online*, November 23, 2020. <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/11/23/index-bodolai-szombathy-indamedia/>.