

Chapter 9: Hungary

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Introduction

Examining the outcomes of the four European Parliament (EP) elections in Hungary from a broader perspective is akin to observing a repetitive video, wherein the victor remains constant. Fidesz has achieved success in all four EP elections held so far, while the balance of power between their rival parties has changed in each instance. Despite these shifts, challengers have consistently struggled to make significant inroads against the prevailing dominance of Fidesz. In the years 2004 and 2009, Fidesz emerged victorious from opposition, whereas in 2014 and 2019, it was the incumbent governing party at the time of its triumphs. The communicative strategy of the winning party has also evolved. In the first two campaigns, it reflected upon EP elections through the lens of domestic political developments, whereas in subsequent campaigns, it mobilised voters by critiquing the European Union (EU), colloquially referred to as ‘Brussels’. Conversely, other political entities in the EP campaigns predominantly conducted pro-EU campaigns. These endeavours were occasionally employed either to divert attention from domestic policy concerns (as witnessed in 2004 and 2009) or to present an alternative viewpoint countering Fidesz’s EU criticism (as observed in 2014 and 2019). Nonetheless, all these campaign themes demonstrated limited efficacy in motivating voters to participate in the electoral process, prompting the need for an overarching theoretical framework to examine the EP campaigns in Hungary.

The most common theoretical framework employed in the analysis of EP elections is the second-order election model, as proposed by Reif and Schmitt in 1980. Since its conceptualisation, this model has undergone rigorous examination and scrutiny by the authors and other scholars with varying results (Hix and Marsh, 2011; Marsh, 1998; Reif et al., 1997). Nonetheless, its fundamental principles are still considered to be valid expectations for these elections. The foundational theory describes these elections as contests characterised by lower stakes compared to first-order elections, resulting in diminished voter turnout, weaker performance of incumbent parties, and heightened performance of smaller and new

parties. Before undertaking a detailed examination of European election campaigns in Hungary, we will provide a comprehensive overview of the four previous elections. However, it is important to note that the evaluation of the second-order election model’s validity is beyond the scope of this study.

Electoral system

As of 2023, Hungary is represented in the EP by 21 members. Initially, 24 representatives were elected in 2004 in accordance with the Treaty of Nice (2001). Subsequently, this number was reduced to 22 with the accession of new member states in 2007, and further decreased to 21 upon Croatia’s integration into the community.

Hungarian representatives are elected through a proportional system, wherein the entire national territory comprises a single electoral district with a magnitude of 21. Seats are allocated using the D’Hondt method among closed party lists that secure at least 5% of the national vote.¹ Political parties are required to collect 20,000 signatures from Hungarian citizens with voting rights to register their lists. Since Hungary’s accession, no major reform has been implemented to this system (Act CXIII of 2003 on the election of the Members of the European Parliament). An important alteration to the electoral rules occurred in 2018 when the National Assembly facilitated voting by mail for Hungarian citizens lacking permanent residence in the country. This modification explicitly extends voting rights to individuals residing outside the European Union territory. The legislative decision owes its significance to a specific event in Hungarian history. After the First World War, the country lost approximately two-thirds of its territory and half of its population in accordance with the Treaty of Trianon, resulting in a high number of ethnic Hungarians losing their citizenship and living in foreign countries (Hajdú, 2020). The majority of their descendants reside in the neighbouring countries. In 2012, individuals that could prove their Hungarian lineage were granted the opportunity to gain citizenship and voting rights for parliamentary election. This provision can be considered a continuation of the government’s effort to enfranchise them and enables individuals

¹ The D’Hondt method is used for allocating seats in a proportional manner. A series of quotients are generated for each party by dividing their votes with consecutive integers up to the total number of seats to be distributed. Seats are assigned for these quotients in a descending order.

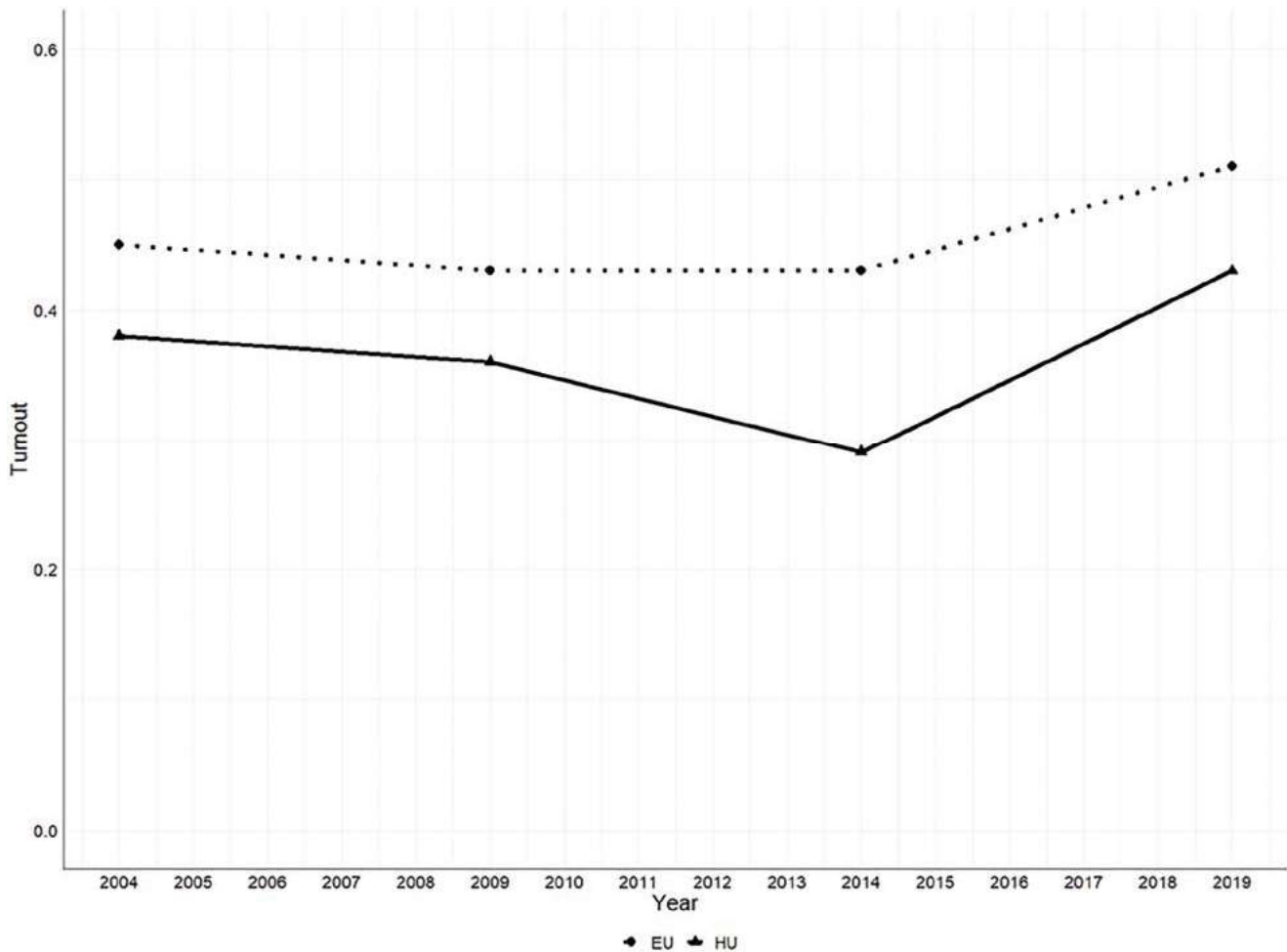


Figure 9.01: European and Hungarian election turnout on EP elections. Source: European Parliament.

who have never resided in the EU to participate in the elections. In 2019, 57,608 such citizens voted, constituting a modest 1.7% of valid votes, exerting minimal influence on the final results. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that 95.97% of these mailed-in ballots endorsed the governing Fidesz-KDNP alliance.

The system used for the election of Members of the European Parliament (MEP) diverges significantly from that employed in legislative elections in Hungary. In the National Assembly, 106 representatives are elected through a single-member plurality system, with an additional 93 securing seats from national party lists in accordance with proportional rules. This hybrid electoral system places substantial emphasis on majoritarian elements, posing challenges for smaller political entities in attaining representation. The inclusivity inherent in the proportional system of European elections, coupled with lower entry barriers—manifested in reduced signature requirements for list registration and more easily attainable seats owing to generally diminished turnout—should strengthen second-

order characteristics, rendering it an attractive entry point for new political parties.

Within the context of the second-order election model, temporal alignment with parliamentary cycles emerges as a crucial factor. Elections held shortly after a national contest, during the so-called ‘honeymoon period’, tend to favour the incumbent governing parties, whereas mid-term elections typically tilt in favour of the opposition. Applying this framework to the Hungarian scenario, the elections of 2004 and 2019 can be characterised as mid-term contests, while 2009 occurred at the conclusion of the parliamentary cycle, preceding the subsequent national election by less than a year. Notably, 2014 squarely fell within the aforementioned honeymoon period, held in June less than two months after the general elections in April.

Turnout

Hungarian voter turnout in European elections is consistently lower compared to both national elections and other member states. In 2004, only

38.5% of eligible voters participated, marking the initiation of a gradual decline that reached its lowest at 28.97% in 2014. However, the most recent elections in 2019 witnessed a notable upswing, when a record-breaking 43.37% of eligible voters decided to cast their ballots. Over the four elections conducted thus far, turnout has consistently been higher in urban centres and lower in small towns and villages. Notably, settlements with more than 25,000 eligible voters consistently surpassed the national average in terms of turnout. The smallest rural villages, however, deviate from this pattern, with those having fewer than 500 eligible voters also recording an above-average turnout. Although Hungarian turnout remains below the European average, it intriguingly aligns with international trends, experiencing a decline in 2014 followed by a substantial increase in 2019.

Results

According to the second-order election model, governing parties are typically expected to underperform in European elections, particularly in later stages of the parliamentary cycle. In Hungary, however, the government-opposition dynamic appears to have less influence, revealing an alternate pattern. Fidesz, in alliance with a smaller right-wing party, has emerged victorious in all four European elections since Hungary's accession, even during their time in opposition. Except for 2004, where they secured 47.4%, Fidesz consistently received an absolute majority of valid votes: 56.36% in 2009; 51.48% in 2014; and 53.78% in 2019.

This sustained success can be attributed to multiple factors. In 2004, the governing coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) faced a political crisis when it was revealed that the socialist Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy had previously worked for the secret service of the Hungarian People's Republic. This scandal contributed significantly to his eventual resignation after the elections. In 2009, domestic politics again favoured the right-wing opposition as a leaked speech by the socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, in which he admitted to lying in the 2006 campaign about Hungary's economic performance, led to a loss of public support. Fidesz capitalised on this discontent, orchestrating a successful referendum in 2008 where the majority of voters rejected the socialist-liberal government's reform plans, leading to the dissolution of the coalition

with the liberals. Subsequently, Gyurcsány resigned and the selection of his successor, in an unusually public process, further eroded confidence in left-wing parties by the 2009 European elections. The transformative shift continued into the 2014 elections, where the quasi-two-party system began to evolve into a dominant party structure (Enyedi, 2016), with Fidesz in a hegemonic position, securing an absolute majority in both 2014 and 2019. In further sections, we will elaborate on how Fidesz campaigns used these favourable situations to their advantage.

Small parties, new parties and mobilisation

According to the second-order model and due to the relative inclusivity of the electoral system, EP elections are expected to be an attractive avenue for new political entities. Despite the Hungarian party system experiencing several major shifts since the country's accession, only two extra-parliamentary parties managed to secure seats in the European Parliament: the radical right-wing Jobbik in 2009 and the centre-liberal Momentum in 2019. Notably, both parties had participated in the preceding general election but fell short of the 5 percent threshold, indicating that the European campaign did not initially serve as their entry point into national politics.

To evaluate the performance of small parties across the four European elections, examining their results in proportion of the votes they had received in earlier general elections provides valuable insights. While political preferences may evolve over time, this calculation offers a preliminary estimate of each party's efficacy in mobilising their prior voter base.² Results indicate a varied performance among small parties, with Fidesz outperforming most competitors in terms of mobilisation. Parties such as Jobbik in 2009, Momentum, and the Democratic Coalition (DK) in 2019 experienced exponential growth, reflected in their higher mobilisation index. Conversely, certain small parties, including Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in 2009, LMP in 2014, and both Jobbik and LMP (Politics Can Be Different until 2020, LMP – Hungary's Green Party since then) in 2019, encountered challenges in mobilising their base for European elections. The data suggests that, generally, small parties do not hold a distinct advantage in these contests. Nonetheless, the European elections provide opportunity for voters to realign their political allegiance and reshape the distribution of support within the opposition, albeit without causing significant change in the dominant

² To calculate this, we divided the number of votes received by each party list on the elections to the European Parliament with the number of votes they had received in the previous parliamentary contests. We used the 2002 results for 2004, the 2006 results for 2009, the 2014 results for 2014, and the 2018 results for 2019. The resulting index would take the value of 1 if a party could mobilise all their voters (or at least the same number of voters) from the previous elections.

Party	European Party affiliation	2004	2009	2014	2019
Fidesz-KDNP	EPP	47.40%	56.36%	51.48%	53.78%
MDF	EPP (2004), ECR (2009)	5.33%	5.31%	-	-
MSZP	PSE (2004), S&D	34.30%	17.37%	10.90%	6.76%
SZDSZ	ALDE	7.74%	2.16%	-	-
Jobbik	NI	-	14.77%	14.67%	6.51%
DK	PES	-	-	9.75%	16.44%
Együtt-PM	Greens/EFA	-	-	7.25%	-
LMP	Greens/EFA	-	-	5.04%	-
Momentum	Renew Europe	-	-	-	10.05%

Figure 9.02: Results of the European Parliament elections in Hungary for parties that reached the legal threshold at least once. Source: European Parliament, 2019; Hungarian National Election Office, 2019.

position of the governing parties.

Fidesz in opposition, 2004 and 2009

As previously noted, Fidesz, along with its coalition partner, has consistently secured victory in all EP elections held in Hungary since 2004, irrespective of its position within the government-opposition dichotomy. A distinctive feature that sets apart the election campaigns of 2004 and 2009 from those in 2014 and 2019 lies in the characteristics of the party system: whereas in the former instances Fidesz contended with one relatively robust left-wing party, in the latter instances Fidesz confronted numerous smaller adversaries, having already established a hegemonic position.

The EP election campaigns brought success for every significant party except MSZP in 2004. The EP election provided an evaluative opportunity for the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition. However, economic challenges, uncertainties surrounding EU accession, and budgetary restrictions announced between 2003 and 2004 constrained the campaign's thematic scope for the government (Lakner, 2005). Despite pertinent issues such as imminent tax modifications, governmental reorganisation, healthcare reform, and proposed social legislation dominating the media agenda during the campaign period, the government

sought to divert attention from these subjects. The MSZP attempted to incorporate favourable economic indicators into its communication, emphasising GDP growth, while the opposition highlighted the national budget deficit. Nevertheless, the government started the campaign from a disadvantaged position and struggled to dictate the narrative (Világgazdaság, 2004). Furthermore, the popularity of the governing parties substantially declined due to the incumbent Prime Minister's involvement with the secret services, coupled with internal conflicts within the party, leading to a considerable surge in support for Viktor Orbán's Fidesz. Major research institutes universally predicted a victory for Fidesz, with some anticipating a 10% advantage (Political Capital, 2004, June 8).

In the initial phase of the campaign, Fidesz introduced the so-called 'national petition', distinct from the more recent 'national consultations', positioning itself strategically within ongoing discussions. The document delineated five pivotal points for the national budget, with a notable focus on various social issues, encompassing housing, affordable food, gas, and medicine prices. Additionally, it articulated positions against hospital privatisation, advocated for job preservation, and expressed support for national farmers (Fábián et al., 2010). Fidesz successfully garnered over one million signatures in

support of the petition, although critics, including some competitors, contended that this could be construed more as a campaign tactic than a genuine political intention, given that amending the budget required a parliamentary decision (Political Capital, 2004, April 16).

As the campaign progressed, its tone took on an increasingly confrontational character, with Fidesz emphasising the theme of national debt and attributing responsibility to the governing parties. This narrative culminated with Fidesz disseminating pamphlets, designed to resemble actual postal cheques, to citizens, captioned 'Your debt', enumerating the per capita public debt amount. Furthermore, Fidesz flyers forecast impending price increases for various products (e.g., a 19% rise in gas prices, a 30% increase in the price of sugar, and a 42% increase in the price of potatoes), while attributing the situation to the 'banker government' (Fábián et al., 2010: 320).

In contrast, the MSZP predominantly relied on positive messaging aimed at highlighting past governmental achievements, such as a 50% wage increase in healthcare, education, and social sectors, tax-free minimum wage, and augmented family allowances. Their communication centred around the slogan 'Others only talk, MSZP works'.

The MSZP attempted to employ a previously efficient election rhetoric emphasising unity, with the Prime Minister proposing early in the campaign that parliamentary parties should contest the elections on a unified list (Enyedi, 2006). However, as the election date approached, MSZP's messaging took on a progressively negative tone. For instance, they published a booklet titled 'Best of [László] Kövér', featuring controversial statements by the Fidesz party's chairman (Bohus, 2004). Efforts aiming for European-level unity persisted until the conclusion of the campaign. At MSZP's concluding campaign event, party leader and Foreign Minister László Kovács articulated a commitment to sending representatives to the EP who were disinclined to engage in gratuitous quarrels (MTV, 2004).

Concurrently, the two smaller parties that secured mandates, SZDSZ and MDF, successfully pursued a process of emancipation from their coalition partners during the campaign. SZDSZ adhered to classic liberal themes, rejecting intolerance, domestic violence, nationalism, and high taxes. Notably, they introduced a distinctly EU-centred topic, advocating for cities to receive a larger share of EU funds (Enyedi, 2006). Conversely,

³ For more information about neo-Nazi murders of Roma in 2008 and 2009 see: European Roma Rights Centre (2022, September 5): *Hungary: Neo-Nazi Murderer Finally Admits His Guilt 13 Years After the 'Roma Killings' and Confirms Two Members of the Death Squad Remain Free*. Errc.org. <http://www.errc.org/news/hungary-neo-nazi-murderer-finally-admits-his-guilt-13-years-after-the-roma-killings-and-confirms-two-members-of-the-death-squad-remain-free>.

the MDF sought to differentiate itself from Fidesz and foster autonomy, employing slogans such as 'normal Hungary' (Hegedűs, 2004).

As a result, despite a favourable political climate, the campaign proved to be triumphant for Fidesz, securing 47.4% of the votes and thus obtaining twelve seats (out of the 24 at the time) in the European Parliament. Their principal opponent, the MSZP, trailed them with 34.3% of the votes, securing nine seats. While Fidesz utilised its mid-term victory to absolve itself of lingering political responsibility for the 2002 national election defeat, the aftermath for MSZP resulted in the resignation of incumbent Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy. He was succeeded by Ferenc Gyurcsány, whose political figure subsequently played a pivotal role in Fidesz campaigns.

Despite Fidesz's triumph in the 2004 EP elections, the party encountered a setback in the 2006 national parliamentary elections, consequently entering the 2009 European election campaign once again from opposition. However, the political landscape underwent a subsequent shift. A key development in the election was the abrupt ascent of Jobbik. The far-right party's success was primarily attributed to the sustained prominence of the topic of Roma murders on the national agenda. The Tiszalök murder, in particular, garnered such significance that major media outlets accorded more attention to this issue than to the EP elections themselves (Szabó, 2010).³ Ongoing investigations and court proceedings related to the case, coupled with the activities of the Hungarian Guard, consistently provided grounds for referencing Jobbik, although their politicians were seldom afforded opportunities to speak in news programs. During this period, the term 'Gypsy crime' permeated public consciousness, with the far-right party unequivocally dominating the narrative on this subject (Karácsony et al., 2010). Jobbik's campaign posters featured slogans such as 'Hungary belongs to the Hungarians!', adorned with the colours of the national flag, and frequently incorporated expressions like 'The New Force' or the promise of reconquering Europe (Nagy, 2009).

As previously mentioned, the leaked speech of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány significantly undermined support for the government, a development characterised by the opposition as a 'crisis of legitimacy'. Subsequently, the 2008 global financial crisis further eroded the government's standing, compelling the implementation of austerity measures that were met with widespread public disapproval. Moreover, in December 2008, the



Image 9.01: newspaper advertisement for the Hungarian Socialist Party ‘Others only talk, MSZP works’. Source: Népszava (2004, June 4:1).

government’s position in a national referendum (termed ‘social referendum’)⁴ fell short of the opposition standpoint, indicative of a measurable shift in public opinion. The political climate grew pessimistic, prompting Ferenc Gyurcsány to announce in March 2009 that he was willing to resign if the governing parties identified a replacement in due time. In response to this tumultuous situation, Fidesz’s campaign was formulated around the imperative for change, featuring key slogans such as ‘New direction, Yes, Hungary can do better!’, and ‘A nation says ENOUGH’.

The primary antagonist of the Fidesz campaign was Ferenc Gyurcsány and his government, due to their perceived shortcomings in the management of the economic crisis. A noteworthy illustration of this facet of the campaign is the creation of a blog titled ‘Gyurcsány is to blame.’⁵ This blog aimed to capture and sustain the attention of voters, explaining how the errors in crisis management exacerbated Hungary’s financial situation, leading to consequences such as factory closures, post office shutdowns, and school mergers. To amplify the dissemination of these messages, stickers with the same slogan were strategically placed throughout the country, appearing on public transport vehicles and in public squares. While the actual campaign itself was relatively brief, such tools contributed to the Fidesz campaign capturing the attention of voters beyond the campaign period as well (Mihályffy, 2010: 38–39).

Besides its primary emphasis on the need for change and dissatisfaction with the left-wing government, the 2009 Fidesz campaign incorporated a rather detailed policy program. In an article published in the daily Magyar Nemzet, Viktor Orbán expounded on how Hungary might have faced bankruptcy without EU membership, portraying a vision of a robust Europe with a strong Hungary within it. Simultaneously, he attributed Hungary’s

⁴ The ‘social referendum’ involved questions about the elimination of fees within the healthcare and education systems, which had been introduced during the tenure of the second Gyurcsány cabinet. Initiated by the opposition parties (Fidesz–KDNP), this referendum is deemed a distinctive success in Hungary’s history of referendums. Notably, it met the stringent criteria for validity and achieved success, boasting an unusually high turnout of 50.51%.

⁵ The blog is still accessible to this day. See: <https://gyurcsanyahibas.blog.hu/>

current weakened state to the governing parties (Orbán, 2009: p. 1; 6). The party’s program outlined various policy agendas, encompassing demographic policy, healthcare, equal opportunities, education, employment policy, energy policy, research and development, environmental protection, and rural development, among other areas (Mihályffy, 2010: 40).

One of the major casualties of the election was the SZDSZ, failing to secure any mandates. Their campaign centred on messages of inclusivity, tolerance, and expertise. Utilising twenty-three individuals representing diverse minorities, they aimed to underscore the diversity of Hungarians within the framework of the ‘One Hungary!’ campaign (Ördögh, 2010). The MSZP’s campaign also featured a rejection of the far-right, with posters conveying the message: ‘I won’t vote for the right because they collaborate with extremists’. Additional campaign messages focused on national political issues, emphasising the government’s prior accomplishments. The visually distinctive concept on the posters highlighted female lead candidates, sympathisers, and group photos of lead candidates and supporters (Nagy, 2009).

In parallel with the 2004 EP elections, the 2009 Fidesz campaign proved highly successful, securing 56.37% of the votes that translated to fourteen seats out of twenty-two. This electoral triumph held particular significance for Fidesz as it foreshadowed the subsequent 2010 general elections, which culminated in a two-thirds majority for Fidesz in the Hungarian parliament. This marked the onset of a new era in Hungarian politics.

The ‘illiberal’ era of EP elections in Hungary, 2014 and 2019

The 2014 EP elections represent a crucial moment in Hungary’s history of European Parliamentary elections. Not only was it the first election year



Image 9.02: Jobbik poster 'Hungary belongs to the Hungarians!'
Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.

when the roles shifted among the contestants, with Fidesz entering the race from the governing position, but it also marked the inaugural occasion in Hungarian history when the EP and national general elections coincided in the same year. However, this convergence led to diminished interest in the European elections, with a turnout of only 28.97% of eligible voters. Most participating parties had already exhausted their mobilisation potential in the preceding general elections in April 2014. An additional noteworthy consequence was the minimal discernible distinction between parties' European election campaigns and their campaigns for the parliamentary elections. With these factors, Fidesz achieved another triumph, securing twelve seats out of twenty-one.

The primary messages conveyed by Fidesz during the EP campaign were characterised by succinctness and directness, with a noticeable tone of hostility towards the EU, or as presented in the campaign, towards Brussels. Prominent among these messages were the demands for 'Respect for Hungarians!' and exclamations urging to 'Let's send a message to Brussels!'. Furthermore, exceedingly simple messages, such as the recurring slogan 'Only the Fidesz', were prominently featured throughout the campaign. An interesting observation is that some of these slogans were 'salvaged' from the preceding general elections; for instance, on certain billboards, the sentence 'Hungary's Prime Minister' was merely overlaid by the aforementioned messages, eliminating the need to take down the billboards after the general elections, as they were repurposed. Another crucial shift from the

previously analysed elections is that in 2014, Fidesz did not face a single prominent challenger as it had in preceding elections. The opposition parties were dispersed and embroiled in internal conflicts, rendering the tactic of straightforward campaign communication ineffective.

The simplification of messages and the absence of substantive policy themes represent one of the most conspicuous changes compared to Fidesz's previous two EP campaigns. This shift can be attributed to various factors, including the growing influence of digitalisation in campaigns, particularly on social media platforms that favour concise and direct messages over comprehensive and informative articles. Another factor is the increasing preference of governing parties to utilise billboards as a primary platform for their campaign messages—not only during campaigns but also throughout the electoral cycle—thus constraining the scope and content of the materials used. Additionally, it is noteworthy that changes in the media landscape have significantly facilitated the acquisition of spaces for billboards by the governing parties, providing further incentive for the parties to lean in this direction.

The European focus of campaign communication was influenced by various events at the European level, including the implementation of the Spitzenkandidat system, the unfolding migrant crisis, and the Euro crisis. However, from Hungary's perspective, it was predominantly Fidesz that kept the country's relationship with the Union on the agenda. Therefore, to discern the main messages of the 2014 EP campaign, one must scrutinise the various interviews given by candidates and

representatives of Fidesz. This examination reveals that, in terms of the campaign themes, the discussion of the EU frequently arose in juxtaposition with ‘national independence’, characterised by sub-topics such as the early repayment of the IMF debt or the defence of the Hungarian standpoint in conflicts with EU institutions (Kapitány and Kapitány, 2014: 14).

MSZP focused its campaign on the opportunities provided by EU membership, emphasising messages such as EU-level job creation and the economic opportunities within the EU. In contrast to the negative portrayal of the EU by the ruling party, smaller parties like Együtt (Together), PM (Dialogue for Hungary), or LMP highlighted the positive aspects of integration, underscoring the importance of European cooperation (Koller, 2017). Együtt campaigned for the coexistence of national and European identities, rejecting the mutual exclusivity of Hungarian and European identities (Nyugat, 2014).

The DK (Democratic Coalition – formed as a split from MSZP in 2011 and led by former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány) structured its campaign around the theme of European cooperation, articulating its messages based on a vision for the future of the EU, aiming to attract votes with the concept of the United States of Europe. At the party’s campaign opening event, the leader, Ferenc Gyurcsány, stated, ‘Our world can be more successful if we are not afraid to say that in historical perspectives, we would like to have the United States of Europe’ (ATV, 2014). Meanwhile, Jobbik’s campaign strongly emphasised patriotism, national identity, and the preservation of national sovereignty against European political processes. The escalating migrant crisis was a central theme, they advocated for reinforced border protection and stricter security measures. Additionally, economic issues, particularly the defence of the national economy, played a significant role in Jobbik’s campaign, as evident in the slogan ‘Hungarian economy, European income!’ (Nyugat, 2014). A representative of Jobbik stated during a press conference introducing the poster campaign that without the realisation of the concept of a Europe of nations, national self-determination and effective national representation, the Hungarian people will not be able to live prosperously in Europe (Hirado.hu, 2014).

The significance of the 2019 EP elections surpassed that of previous years, although it was still considered a second-order election by voters. The path to the election victory of Fidesz was marked by conflicts and confrontations, not only among national political actors but also between Fidesz and the EPP. The latter conflict arose just before the start of the EP campaign. As part of their ongoing tendency to portray the EU (or ‘Brussels’) as an external entity seeking to ‘weaken member states’ and dismantle



Image 9.03: Fidesz poster ‘A nation says ENOUGH’. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 9.04: Fidesz poster ‘Let’s send a message to Brussels: Respect for Hungarians!’. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.

national barriers, the government launched a poster campaign targeting Jean-Claude Juncker, the incumbent president of the European Commission. The campaign depicted Juncker alongside Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros, frequently framed within Fidesz narratives as the financier behind all opposition activities—both within the country and at the EU level. The accompanying text on these billboards stated, ‘You have the right to know what Brussels is planning’, implying that the two portrayed figures aimed to relocate migrants to Hungary. In response to the campaign, on March 20, 2019, the EPP voted to suspend Fidesz’s membership. Their reasoning specifically cited the personal campaign against President Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP, 2019).

Throughout the actual campaign, the Fidesz campaign continued to emphasise anti-immigrant sentiments. Frequently recurring slogans included ‘Immigration needs to be stopped now and All the immigration supporters will be there, we have to be there too [at the elections]’. The campaign also featured demands seemingly directed at Brussels, urging the EU to stop supporting ‘George Soros’s NGOs’. Another key aspect of this narrative was the protection of Hungarian identity, values, and families in particular, as well as the Christian cultural heritage in general, which was portrayed as being threatened by a pro-immigrant EU administration.

The tone of the opposition parties’ campaign was influenced by the controversial amendment of the overtime employment law, commonly referred to as ‘slave law’, which sparked widespread protests. This controversial modification remained a prominent issue for months, leading left-liberal opposition parties to unite and collaborate, mobilising opposition voters. The unity observed during the protests even prompted discussions about forming a common EP list (László et al., 2019).

While the government party’s campaign focused on immigration-related issues, a significant portion of the opposition sought to avoid this topic. The MSZP-PM coalition primarily addressed national political issues and critiqued Fidesz and Viktor Orbán’s governance. The idea of forming a united front permeated their communication, positioning themselves as the sole common list against the government. Most parties relied heavily on traditional campaign tools and social media, utilising billboards. However, Jobbik faced challenges in accessing poster spaces due to fines previously imposed on them by the authorities (Merkovity et al., 2019). The two most successful opposition parties, DK and Momentum, centred their campaigns around EU-related topics. DK aimed to present itself as the ‘most European’ party, advocating for the United States of Europe and

common European social security. Momentum linked itself to the EU through welfare, social dimensions, and also addressed environmental issues in their communication (Merkovity et al., 2019: 136).

The primary platform for the campaign was social media, with a significant focus on the official Facebook profiles of the parties, the Prime Minister, and leading candidates. Facebook emerged as the leading platform, serving as the primary arena for Hungarian public discourse. Opposition parties predominantly relied on this platform to convey their messages, partly due to the limited opportunities for text to appear in traditional media due to overregulation. In contrast to the offline dimension, Facebook saw the dominance of government-critical media and opposition political figures, surpassing the government party and its affiliated online media in terms of advertising spending (Bene et al., 2021). The confrontational nature of the campaign, coupled with victimisation narratives and other factors, led to an unprecedented and record-breaking turnout in the history of Hungarian European Parliamentary elections. However, Fidesz once again secured the absolute majority of votes, winning 13 out of 21 seats.

Conclusion

Fidesz has consistently won all four EP elections since Hungary’s accession to the EU. However, the campaign and communication style of the party has evolved significantly since they came to power. In the first two elections, the campaign had elements of protest against the governing parties, incorporating alternative policy ideas and solutions. In later campaigns, Fidesz emphasised its strength and competence as the incumbent party, particularly in standing up to certain EU officials and institutions to protect Hungary’s independence.

As observed, policy themes gradually faded from the campaign, and messages became more brief, straightforward, and confrontational, relying on expressive catchphrases to grab voters’ attention. The success of this change in campaign style was facilitated by shifts in the party system, with Fidesz holding a hegemonic position against a highly fragmented opposition, reducing the need for meaningful dialogues and deeper policy disputes.

A new era could begin in 2024, as a notable, albeit indirect modification enacted in 2023 stipulates that Hungarian municipal and European elections must be scheduled simultaneously. While formally affecting the timing of local rather than European contests, this change is anticipated to impact voter turnout, with expectations of increased engagement due to the simultaneous scheduling of municipal elections, which traditionally garner more attention.



Image 9.05: MSZP commercial ‘Security in Europe (We are also voting for the MSZP list!)’. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 9.06: Together-PM poster ‘I am both Hungarian and European. What about you?’. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 9.07: Jobbik poster ‘Hungarian economy, European income!’. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 9.10: Momentum commercial ‘Looking at the future! (Vote for the Momentum!)’. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 9.08: Fidesz poster 'Support Viktor Orbán's programme, stop immigration!'. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 9.09: MSZP-PM poster 'The only joint list. We joined together! Homeland, Love, Europe!'. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.

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