

Masking the Strangulation of Opposition Parties as Pandemic Response: Austerity Measures Targeting the Local Level in Hungary

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While a large literature studies the various tools of autocratic survival, targeting opposition actors with austerity measures in electoral autocracies is hitherto understudied. This paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a rare opportunity for Hungary's Fidesz party to disarm opposition parties via cutting off resources of municipalities led by opposition mayors and eliminating any remnants of local governments' fiscal autonomy. Analysing original data from government decrees on local transfers, this study contributes to the existing literature by conceptualising fiscal strangulation as part of electoral authoritarian regimes' toolbox to discredit opposition parties and their ability to govern locally.

Keywords: austerity, critical juncture, electoral autocracies, fiscal strangulation, autocratic survival, local governments

JEL Classifications: H12, H71, H72

Introduction

How can electoral autocracies constrain their opposition, once it has achieved an electoral breakthrough at the subnational elections and proceeds to establish its strongholds at the local level? Recent local elections in Turkey, Poland and Hungary have meant the first rays of hope for opposition parties, challenging autocratic incumbents, united on a pro-democracy platform. These developments should concern rulers like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Jarosław Kaczyński or Viktor Orbán, whose appeal partly rests on their opposition being weak, fragmented and depicted as unsuited to govern. If newly minted mayors are able to realise good governance at the subnational level, their performance might undermine the regime's long-term sustainability.

Literature on autocratic survival demonstrates how tools such as co-opting candidates or repressing activists of the opposition contribute to upholding autocratic dominance (Davenport, 2007, Gerschewski, 2013). Nonetheless, such strategies are somewhat less relevant for countries which constitute the European Union's "other democratic deficit" (Kelemen, 2017), nor they are particularly useful in contexts where opposition is "genuine" (as opposed to "sham"), and entrenched cleavages combined with high levels of polarisation mean that being co-opted equates to political suicide. These strategies also feel like shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted: once having considerable discretion over disbursing municipal resources and having obtained direct legitimacy from voters, settling with the status quo in exchange for minor

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financial or political concessions from the incumbent's side, is suddenly a less appealing prospect for subnational actors. Opposition politicians might subsequently capitalise on their local success and emerge as viable challengers nationally, or at least expect repressive measures against them to receive more publicity and meet with a considerably larger backlash.

We argue electoral autocracies can use austerity strategically, targeted at institutions controlled by their opposition, to nip political competition in the bud. Restricting opposition politicians' room for manoeuvre, as well as their ability to govern locally, fiscal strangulation can be a similarly effective tool of autocratic survival as repression or the creation of counter-majoritarian, tutelary institutions (Bogaards, 2018); but unlike those, it draws less attention from scholars and policymakers, given the complexity of central fund allocation to the local level.

For illustrating the aforementioned mechanism, we selected Hungary as a case study, the country which "registered the largest cumulative decline in Nations in Transit history" (Freedom House, as cited in Krekó and Enyedi, 2018, 39) and has been described as a "semi-authoritarian project" (Greskovits, 2015, 30), an "electoral authoritarian regime" (Kelemen, 2017, 220) and a hybrid political system with an "exceptional degree of power concentration" (Krekó and Enyedi, 2018, 39) following Viktor Orbán's victory in 2010, when his Fidesz party won a two-thirds supermajority of the parliamentary seats.¹ The regime's single-party dominance was virtually unchallenged ever since; however, the local elections in 2019 yielded a politically fragmented landscape, where dozens of cities, including the capital, elected opposition mayors. We show how the COVID-19 pandemic allowed Fidesz to clamp down on these opposition-led municipalities, limiting their financial resources and autonomy to a minimum with policies masked as pandemic protection measures.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. The second section conceptualises austerity as a tool of autocratic survival, contrasting it with legitimisation, co-optation and repression. The third section provides a brief overview of how subnational politics lost most of its autonomy in Hungary since Fidesz's ascent to power. Against this backdrop, we theorise in the fourth section that the COVID-19 pandemic allowed Fidesz to engage in *fiscal strangulation*, taking away resources from municipalities that elected a new opposition mayors. The subsequent section discusses our hypotheses, variables and methods, whereas the sixth section presents our results. The last section concludes, elaborates on generalisability and showcases avenues for future research.

Conceptualising austerity as a tool of autocratic survival

The scholarly literature on authoritarian sustainability and autocratic survival mostly focuses on three distinct

mechanisms: legitimisation, repression and co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013). In the section below, we briefly discuss these mechanisms, as well as their limited relevance in the Hungarian context, whilst also arguing that austerity measures targeted at opposition-controlled municipalities fit none of these categories.

Legitimation is generally understood as the process of gaining support (i.e. active consent) by an incumbent, primarily by the means of economic performance and ideology; recent studies have emphasised the role of socio-economic development, as well as social and physical security (Gerschewski, 2013). The Orbán government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic raised serious questions about the ruling party's competence, as Hungary was leading the chart of number of deaths per capita for several months (Meintrup et al., 2021). Focusing on the framing of policy responses and further centralising power instead of implementing stringent countermeasures has been suggested as one of the reasons why Fidesz arguably handled the second and third waves of COVID-19 poorly, resulting in "extremely high fatality numbers" (Batory, 2022, 13).² This performance failure meant a real blow to Fidesz, making it much harder for the incumbent to rely on output legitimisation.

Repression is an umbrella term for coercive sociopolitical control, exerted by political authorities against a country's own citizens (Davenport, 2007). With some noteworthy exceptions,³ most activities belonging to this category are fortunately absent from Hungarian politics, as Fidesz is able to secure its dominance without jailing opposition leaders, physical abuse of protesters or torture and disappearances.

Gerschewski (2013, 22) defines co-optation as "the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite"; in his framework, this mostly describes political elites interacting with business and military elites. Others used this concept to describe opposition politicians, elected to public office, changing their political affiliation (Turovsky, 2014). Some have argued that Fidesz is "becoming increasingly successful at controlling the parliamentary opposition", to the extent that the latter starts to resemble Putin's sham opposition (Krekó and Enyedi, 2018, 49), but the Hungarian party system is still very different from that of Russia. Shortly before the 2019 election, Fidesz tried its best to co-opt opposition politicians, but only three incumbent mayors and a handful of former Green councillors were up for running in government colours (Kovarek and Littvay, 2022). Whereas Erdoğan in Turkey had stronger tools at his disposal to limit the extent of opposition victory at the municipal level—for example displacing DBP mayors accused of collaboration with Kurdish terrorist groups (Esen and Gumuscu, 2019)—, and newly elected opposition politicians at the regional level in Russia have no means to escape the existing patron-client relationships (Turovsky, 2014), similar tools of repression and co-optation are not available for Fidesz in Hungary.

Cutting off resources of municipalities with opposition mayors helps autocratic leaders to survive in hybrid regimes, but this simply does not fit into any of the aforementioned categories. Targeting opposition-led municipalities is neither a civil liberty restriction nor a violation of personal integrity, hence it cannot be conceptualised as a form of repression (Davenport, 2007). Some could posit that Orbán's government offering excess compensation to Fidesz-led municipalities (and depriving only "disloyal" ones of funds) is a manifestation of co-optation, intended to prevent intra-elite splits; or that it is not so different from a carrot-and-stick approach, widely used by democratic and authoritarian governments alike. However, this argument would ignore the ultimate goal, the fiscal starvation of opposition-led municipalities. The strategy we describe in this article is more like digging seeds out of soil, making sure opposition mayors will not be able to grow their own carrots.

Our approach of treating austerity measures as tools of autocratic survival sets our research aside from related literature scrutinising how the allocation of EU and state funds is driven by partisan considerations, in Hungary and elsewhere (e.g. Papp, 2019). Opposition-led municipalities, as well as single-member districts (SMDs) with opposition MPs often receive less central funds than their counterparts, which elected politicians from the ruling party. But our focus is not whether the partisanship of such elected officials is indeed associated with higher or lower levels of central funds received, but rather whether withholding of such funds is used strategically by autocratic governments when they sense the danger of a potent opposition emerging, which could lead to regime breakdown.

Moreover, scholars of democratisation are almost exclusively concerned with understanding how national austerity, introduced out of fiscal necessity rather than strategically, might undermine autocratic stability and powers of non-democratic rulers themselves (e.g. Aaskoven and Grundholm, 2021). Another stream of the literature scrutinises the effect of externally mandated (i.e. by IMF or World Bank bailouts) austerity on autocratic survival; nonetheless imposing austerity on the subnational level by governments as part of their autocratic toolbox has hitherto remained under the radar of scholarly interest.

Not that analyses on central governments' austerity measures shaking up national-local relations are absent from the literature. Austerity, either as a tool of ideology-driven reforms (Thatcherism, Blairism or neoliberalism) or as a response to economic crises, always has an effect on subnational levels. Studying this has become especially relevant following the 2008 financial crisis. Austerity measures can force local actors to find regional solutions (Hall and Jonas, 2014) or drive austerity urbanism (Färber, 2014). Nonetheless, financial crises and neoliberal reforms increase pressure on municipalities and the result is highly

dependent on the initial position of the local government. For example, austerity measures undermined prospects for all but the most affluent local governments in the UK and increased the territorial inequalities (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). The higher the municipality's dependence on central subsidies, the more likely that its financial autonomy will be reduced when austerity measures are induced (Ladner, 2017, 36). Thus, in countries, where municipalities' local autonomy is weak, their exposure to austerity measures can strengthen recentralisation trends (Bolgherini, 2014).

The political relevance of municipalities and mayors

After decades of a Soviet-type council system during Communist Hungary, a decentralised system of local governments was introduced in 1990. The 3092 newly established municipalities gained wide autonomy in terms of their service-providing competencies and (formal) financial capacities, protected by the constitution. Predominantly small communities with less than 5000 inhabitants, they are governed by mayors and councillors, directly elected by local citizens. In line with the mechanisms of the local electoral system, the subnational politics is two-faceted, characterised by independent councillors and mayors in small municipalities (< 10,000 inhabitants) and by the dominance of partisan politics in towns and cities (Dobos, 2022).

In 2010, immediately after its landslide victory, Orbán's Fidesz party began to carry out reforms, which fundamentally changed the functioning of the subnational level. While the formal autonomy of municipalities remained intact, these reforms (implemented by 2014) were subversive for the financial possibilities and service-providing capabilities of local governments, and greatly diminished their importance vis-à-vis national politics.

Formally, local governments continue to face few institutional constraints: upholding their constitutional protection, Fidesz reforms still allow municipalities to provide any services that are not under the jurisdiction of other state organs (e.g. cultural institutions, supplementary subsidies, social housing) on a voluntary basis, once their mandatory tasks (e.g. basic health care, public roads, cemeteries) are fulfilled. The main blow to local autonomy was rather the amendment of local financing rules, which in practice confined municipalities to perform mandatory tasks (see Dobos, 2021). Already before the reforms, local governments were heavily reliant on government transfers, as their own revenues never added up to more than 26–27% of the local budgets (Soós and Kákai, 2010, 538). The more rigorous financing rules leave local governments with using whatever funds they can acquire independently from the central budget, primarily via collecting taxes, to

provide voluntary services. Without tax revenues, mayors do not stand a chance of realising good governance.

Parallel to the decline of effective local autonomy (Figure 1),⁴ the mayoral position also lost some of its importance in the political system. Since 2014, mayors cannot be simultaneously MPs (prohibition of ‘*cumul des mandats*’), an important channel for local level to national politics earlier. Empirical results also suggest that mayors have become subject to an increasing influence of national actors (ministers and MPs) since the 2010s (Dobos, 2021, 111).

Notwithstanding, mayors have remained important cogs in Fidesz’s political machine, as they coordinate clientelistic exchanges in rural municipalities. Contrary to pervasive centralisation, characterising education, public administration and many other domains of public life (Greskovits, 2015, Bogaards, 2018), the distribution of antipoverty benefits has been decentralised by Fidesz

(Mares and Young, 2018, 1449), which allows mayors to politicise policy entitlements. They have discretionary powers with respect to the allocation of social benefits; participation in the workfare program, a precondition for receiving unemployment benefits and other forms of social assistance, largely depends on the goodwill of mayors. Unsurprisingly, mayors often abuse this authority (Kovarek et al., 2017).

Mares and Young (2018) show how Fidesz mayors rely on intermediaries (brokers) to offer long-term policy entitlements between elections and subsequently threaten locals shortly before elections with revoking access to jobs, assets or welfare. Such vote buying and electoral coercion is used to secure re-election for district incumbents, i.e. their co-partisans elected as MPs of respective SMDs. This makes mayors’ role crucial in mobilising voters for the parliamentary elections. As programmatic linkages matter

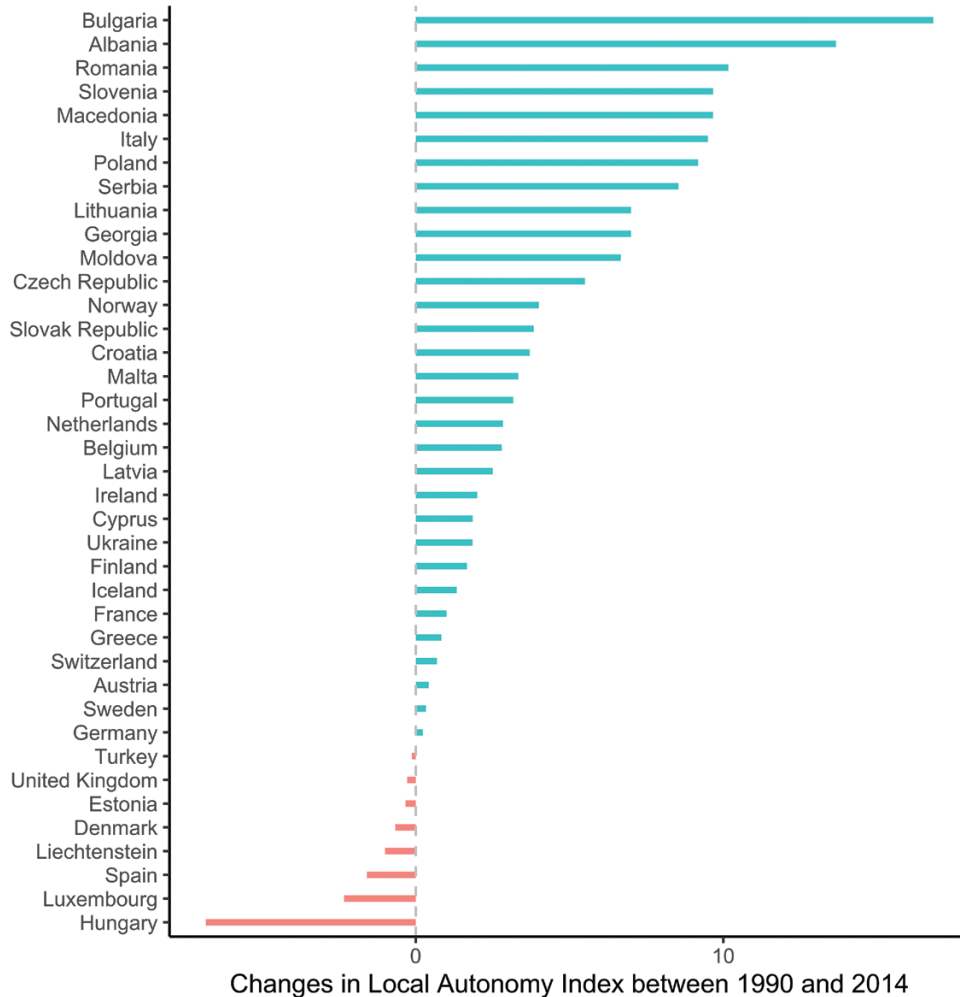


Figure 1. Trends of local autonomy in Europe based on Ladner et al. (2019). See the online version of this article for a colour version of this figure.

less and less for the ruling party,⁵ positive inducements and threats substantially contribute to Fidesz's dominance: as 5–7% of all voters reported personal experiences of mayor favours or welfare pressure (Mares and Young, 2018), it is safe to assume that the party could have not kept its two-thirds supermajority without upholding its clientelistic network. Furthermore, its absence could have endangered Orbán's re-election in 2022.

As Jakli and Stenberg (2021) demonstrated, subnational politics have a neglected, albeit crucial role in the “crystallisation of single-party dominance”, preventing the emergence of a viable opposition. Their findings reveal how governing coalitions limited oversight in almost all major cities with a Fidesz mayor and assembly majority. This allowed mayors to influence how EU development funds are used locally without much public scrutiny, and diminished interest of the local business community in establishing connections with the local opposition. Consequently, leftist and liberal opposition parties have been contesting fewer and fewer seats in municipal elections since Fidesz's ascent to power, lacking the necessary resources to run nation-wide campaigns and perceiving only a handful of seats as contestable. This “subnational feedback loop of illiberalism” (Jakli and Stenberg, 2021, 2) suppresses grassroots-level opposition early on and keeps the system's overall competitiveness at a minimum. Blackmailed by withholding development funds from the municipalities they lead, mayors—Fidesz ones and independents alike—also help the government's agenda by assisting party activists in collecting signatures for petitions, passing symbolic resolutions about issues like migration or LGBTQ rights or using administrative means to hinder events of opposition politicians.⁶

The 2019 local elections and the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary

Since Fidesz came to power in 2010, its hegemony was never seriously challenged by any of the opposition parties: the juxtaposition of cosmopolitan liberals and nationalists prevented them from forging alliances (Enyedi, 2016). Despite growing demand from voters, attempts promoting cross-party coordination have repeatedly failed before each parliamentary election, leading to multiple oppositional candidates competing for SMD mandates in all districts, allowing Fidesz to sweep an easy victory with the plurality of votes.

As Fidesz gained another parliamentary supermajority at the third consecutive general election in 2018, increasingly frustrated opposition voters heavily punished politicians and parties most reluctant to co-ordinate against Fidesz (Kovarek and Littvay, 2019). Sensing public anger, opposition parties have overcome their ideological differences and agreed to contest the upcoming municipal

election in a coordinated fashion. This meant that in most politically relevant settlements (i.e. with a population over 10,000) (Soós and Kákai, 2010) locals could choose between a single opposition candidate versus a Fidesz-nominated one when electing a mayor in 2019.

This yielded the first opposition breakthrough since 2010: the ideologically heterogeneous alliance was able to win Budapest's mayoral seat, to obtain a majority in the capital's General Assembly, while also giving mayors in 10 out of 23 of the largest cities (the so-called cities with county rights). Gains in smaller municipalities were more modest, given Fidesz's exceptional support among rural voters; nevertheless, 32 further settlements with a population greater than 10,000 inhabitants also elected an opposition mayor (Kovarek and Littvay, 2022).

Successful mayors, relying on their high approval ratings, political experience and staff, might appear as viable challengers of autocratic leaders, posing the “danger of an upcoming personal (charismatic) alternative” (Gerschewski, 2013, 28).⁷ Moreover, Fidesz-led municipalities passed various amendments and revisions to local governance between 2010 and 2018, “designed to make it difficult for the political opposition to participate” in local political life (Jakli and Stenberg, 2021, 11), which backfired following the 2019 elections. As such procedural changes reduced any opposition party's capacity to challenge or control mayors and council majorities behind them, they made it easier for newly elected MSZP, DK, Momentum or Jobbik mayors to realise their agenda. Fidesz had a good reason to believe that becoming the opposition in some of its former strongholds will mean ending up as a “loser completely denied of any influence on policymaking” (Vegetti, 2019, 78).

It was already worrisome for Fidesz to have the opposition in charge in several local governments, but the emerging COVID-19 crisis has transformed a concerning episode into a critical juncture. Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) argue that critical junctures are “brief phases of institutional flux”, when political actors have a wider-than-usual range of options (“plausible choices”) and there is a “substantially heightened probability” that these choices will set path-dependent processes in motion. In other words, institutional settings constrain actors' decisions to a less extent, and situations characterised by high uncertainty allow political elites to make decisive decisions, enabling to find a new equilibrium. In the next paragraphs, we show how the combination of a more balanced playing field for the opposition, which emerged following its landslide victory in several major cities, and the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic relaxed structural constraints. This endowed Fidesz with the ability to adopt measures that restrict the opposition's competitiveness even further, which are otherwise, without such heightened contingency, not plausible options given the constitutional and societal constraints.

Prioritising the economy, Fidesz introduced mobility-constraining, lockdown-style policies relatively late and experimented with unconventional policies, such as free parking and reserving shopping time slots exclusively to the elderly, instead of providing free testing or contact tracing. The cabinet spent €850M on excess ventilators, which were never used: thousands of them were purchased in bulk, neglecting the shortage of ICU trained nurses (Batory, 2022, 7). Moreover, unpopular measures, such as mandatory mask wearing or closing down beaches and other recreational facilities, were left to local governments to decide at their discretion. In line with recent changes in Hungary's foreign policy orientation (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021), the government purchased millions of Chinese and Russian vaccines (Sinopharm and Sputnik-V), despite concerns raised about their effectiveness and potential to impede travel for Hungarian citizens within the European Union in the future.

Before the local elections, such moves would have been left without meaningful response, given the political homogeneity of the countryside and Fidesz's strong party discipline. But now, opposition-led municipalities could excel in health policy, over which they possessed issue ownership ever since their municipal campaign. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a chance to out-perform the central government, during a period when citizens' first point of contact became the municipalities. Local governments sent masks to all households, recruited volunteers to help those in quarantine and tried to protect as many lives as possible in nursing homes—one of the very few institutions not yet nationalised and still run by local governments.

Budapest districts provided free PCR tests, partly relying on a one-time, €1M donation of George Soros to the capital. The Mayor of Budapest organised free antibody tests for the elderly, only to conclude that those having received the Chinese jab indeed have significantly lower levels of immunity, raising further doubts about the national government's competence. He also presented infographics, summarising how every Hungary-wide restriction and protocol was introduced weeks before in Budapest. Several opposition politicians, previously appearing as "incompetent" and "incapable of meeting the needs of constituents" (Jakli and Stenberg, 2021, 14), suddenly emerged as responsive leaders and adept crisis managers. All this happened in spite of the ruling Fidesz party possessing a supermajority in the parliament, running a heavily centralised state and declaring a state of emergency on 11 March 2020, effectively allowing the government to rule by decree.

Moreover, the state of emergency had the side effect of empowering a subnational political actor: the mayor. Suspending city councils, their powers were now exercised by mayors. Whereas this resulted in sudden U-turns in policy only at those few municipalities where the local government was not unified and the mayor's out-partisans

held the council majority,⁸ emergency powers have nevertheless increased mayors' visibility, and allowed them to pick fights with the central government in a more prompt manner than before. For instance, the Mayor of Budapest's District IX renamed streets after Tibetan and Uyghur martyrs in the neighbourhood where China's Fudan University planned to open a campus. Opposition mayors also proceeded with purchasing trams or designating industrial zones—decisions which otherwise would have required hard-fought compromises, especially where mayors previously needed the goodwill of each party group.

Normally, mayors are constrained by city councils, which directly possesses most competencies of self-governance (Soós and Kákai, 2010). Contrarily, emergency powers made them significantly more powerful, eliminating horizontal power-sharing and checks-and-balances. Inadvertently, by endowing mayors with emergency powers, Fidesz decreased political fragmentation within the opposition bloc: voters saw responsive and effective opposition mayors, but none of the intra-coalition quarrels that were widely expected before.

Blame it on the pandemic: clamping down on municipalities with austerity

The state of emergency and the subsequent Authorization Act enabled the government to introduce restrictions and overrule existing acts without legislative consent (Hajnal and Kovács, 2020). The government used the pandemic to expand and entrench illiberal institutions, for example with the alteration of the Penal Act and reduction of party subsidies (Hajnal et al., 2021; Batory, 2022). The most severe measures hit the local governments (see Figure 2), primarily through depriving them of their revenue sources. The motor vehicle tax (40% of which was previously collected by municipalities) was transferred to the central budget, the tax on tourism was waived for 2020, and the local business tax, paid by small- and medium-sized enterprises, was halved by the government. Moreover, significantly more municipalities were forced to transfer a portion of their local business tax revenues to the central budget as "solidarity tax", and the government also waived parking fees.

On paper, these measures affected all municipalities equally, but in practice, more developed and urban municipalities, typically led by opposition mayors, were affected more by these fiscal interventions (Kovarek and Littvay, 2022; Batory, 2022, 10; see also Table A8 in the Supplementary Material). The loss of these revenues is not only important from the budget balance perspective but also because these are the exclusive sources of revenue allowing municipalities to provide "extra" services, on a voluntary basis. Without these, local governments are forced to perform mandatory tasks only. As a response, Budapest's mayor started a "Looting our cities is not governing!" campaign in January 2021, which involved

TIMELINE 1: Austerity measures during COVID-19 in Hungary

- 04-03-2020 • First reported case of COVID-19 in Hungary
- 11-03-2020 • Hungary declares state of emergency
- 04-04-2020 • Municipalities lose all income from motor vehicle tax
- 05-04-2020 • Free parking introduced by the government
- 05-06-2020 • Solidarity tax threshold is lowered, making 1 out of 4 municipalities a net contributor
- 03-07-2020 • Parliament passes the budget, depriving local governments of motor vehicle tax revenues in 2021
- 19-12-2020 • 50% cut on business tax revenues is announced for 2021
- 14-01-2021 • Government rules on full compensation for revenue losses for municipalities with <25,000 inhabitants
- 06-05-2021 • Government rules on partial compensation for municipalities with >25,000 inhabitants on a case-by-case basis
- 10-11-2021 • Ministry of Interior declares to keep 50% cut on business tax in place for 2022, without compensation for Budapest

Figure 2. Fiscal strangulation of municipalities during the pandemic. See the online version of this article for a colour version of this figure.

video spots and billboard ads. Whereas (the criteria used for) subsidy and fiscal relief allocation to local governments during the pandemic was not without criticism elsewhere either, it is almost unparalleled in the Global North for an incumbent to use COVID-19 to weaken, if not disable, subnational political actors.⁹

Setting higher local tax rates would have been a way to make up for these lost revenues; however, the government forbid this for municipalities for 2021 and 2022. Thus, the only remaining option to patch the budget holes was compensation from the central budget. For municipalities with less than 25,000 inhabitants, the government offered automatic compensation in January 2021, while it was declared that terms of compensation for more populous local governments will be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. The result of these negotiations was the government decree in June 2021, which compensated only 32 of the 45 cities over 25,000 inhabitants, but none of the capital districts.

Without the pandemic, which turned (opposition) mayors into powerful actors, the consequences of 2019 local elections would have been more subtle, even though opposition parties capitalised on their successful campaign and agreed to contest the 2022 parliamentary elections with a joint list (Batory, 2022, 4–5). The same critical juncture also increased the power of agency for the government, as divesting municipalities of their tax revenues would not have been included in the “range of plausible choice” (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007, 343) before: it would have triggered a far greater popular backlash. The state of emergency prohibited any protest or public gathering, whilst also forbidding to hold referenda. Even protesters

adhering social distancing protocols (honking their cars) received fines up to €3300.

Data and methods

To assess how government policies have affected opposition-led municipalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, we collected data from government decrees, published by the Hungarian Official Gazette (*Magyar Közlöny*) and the National Regional Development and Territorial Information System (*Országos Területfejlesztési és Területrendezési Információs Rendszer, TEIR*). Our data cover the time period from 11 March 2020 to 31 October 2021. We consulted all issues of the Gazette ($N = 457$) published during this time frame, out of which 182 dealt with fund allocation to the local level. Our dependent variable records all transfers in millions of HUF. Losses of municipal revenues are operationalised by variables on tax revenues and—specifically—business tax revenues, based on municipal budget figures in 2019, in millions of HUF, collected from TEIR. The government deprived municipalities most of these revenues following the outbreak of COVID-19. Our main independent variables are a series of dummy variables, capturing the partisan leaning of the municipality. Sourced from Dobos (2022), these denote whether a municipality is led by a Fidesz, an opposition or an independent mayor. Our control variable for population is taken from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH). Lastly, another independent variable captures whether a mayor is “new” (that is, the politician was not an incumbent before the October 2019 local elections).

In the next section, we present results of statistical models, where we predict government transfers to municipalities (funds allocated from the central budget to the local level) using mayors' political affiliation and experience as independent variables, while controlling for population and tax revenue of municipalities. The latter is especially important, as these revenues were partially or fully taken away by the government; consequently, if financial compensation really aimed to make up for funds redirected to the central budget (as opposed to being driven by partisan bias), business tax revenues of a municipality should explain most of the variance in government transfers. This does not mean that fiscal strangulation of local governments was restricted to curtailing tax revenues. For instance, the Public Procurement Authority fined Budapest's public transport company. Nor does it mean that clampdown on the opposition by financial means ends here: 50% of political parties' state funding was also redirected to the central budget. But if compensation was indeed used selectively, largely eschewing opposition-led municipalities, it should be visible from the results of a model with such specifications.

We choose direct government transfers to the local level for the sake of consistency and transparency: our dataset includes all subsidies devoted to cover specific operational or development costs of municipalities. These are, by no means, the only way municipalities are able to obtain funds from higher levels. Distribution of EU Structural Funds, for instance, demonstrates a strong partisan bias (Papp, 2019; Jakli and Stenberg, 2021, 327); as its impact on electoral support for mayors and MPs has already been widely studied and opposition-led municipalities already start with a serious handicap when applying for these, we restrict our analysis to domestic funds, the allocation of which is consistently reported by government decrees.

Most mayors belong to one of the three distinct groups: nominated by Fidesz, nominated by opposition parties, and independents. Municipalities with *Fidesz mayors* might be positively associated with receiving more government transfers; but that would not corroborate our hypothesis on fiscal strangulation, only suggest the existence of partisan bias in fund allocation, a well-documented phenomenon in the Hungarian context. Empirical evidence for the previous mechanism should come in the form of *opposition municipalities* being deprived of their funds; ruling parties allocating substantially less resources to places where "rebellion is brewing": localities governed by opposition mayors. Lastly, *independent mayors* partake in clientelistic exchanges, conditioning ongoing access to transfers on supporting Fidesz candidates at the parliamentary election (Mares and Young, 2018). This suggests that if Fidesz indeed attempts to fiscally suffocate local governments, it should only target opposition-led ones. Contrarily, Fidesz would gain nothing by strangulating independents by austerity measures: the municipalities they lead are either

so small that political competition for local seats takes place without party candidates (Soós and Kákai, 2010), or despite identifying as independents, such mayors remain useful in mobilising voters on behalf of Fidesz. For this reason, we expect that having an independent mayor will not diminish the amount of government subsidies; in other words, the respective sign of the dichotomous variable won't be negative, if a statistically significant relationship is reported. Contrarily, if independent mayors do face an uphill battle in attracting central funds, our fiscal strangulation framework would be refuted, as the autocratic government would target *all* actors, not just a select few potent enough to emerge as challengers.

If the Hungarian government acted in line with our theoretical expectations, the most severe measures of fiscal strangulation were directed at *newly elected opposition mayors*: if incumbent mayors of those few opposition strongholds posed a serious threat to Fidesz's single-party dominance, the ruling party would have either clamped down on their municipalities before, or one might have witnessed such mayors emerging as potent candidates for Prime Minister before the 2019 local elections. However, being a new mayor might also influence the extent of central funds their municipality receives, irrespective of partisanship. Contrary to incumbents, new mayors might lack the network or the experience necessary to lobby for such funds, or might be busy with managing the transition (for example hiring and firing public officials or reviewing ongoing projects), which could hinder their efforts aimed at bringing in funding. For this reason, our explanatory variables include a measure of new mayors, capturing politicians who were *not* incumbent mayors during the previous term (2014–2019); we then subsequently interact this variable with our opposition dummy. We hypothesise that having an opposition mayor is associated with receiving substantially less central funds when these mayors were not in office before the 2019 local elections.

Results and Discussion

The results in Table 1 demonstrate a robust negative correlation between a municipality being led by an opposition mayor and the amount of central funds received. The model without interactions indicates that on average, having elected an opposition mayors cost 2.25 billion HUF (approx. €6.2M) to a municipality. At the same time, the Fidesz mayor dummy is not significant at conventional levels in either of the models. This corroborates our theoretical expectations that allocation patterns of government transfers were primarily driven not by the intention of rewarding loyal municipalities, but rather of fiscally suffocating opposition mayors. In the Appendix, we present the same model, swapping out the Fidesz dummy for a dichotomous variable capturing municipalities led by independent mayors. As hypothesised,

Table 1. Predicting fiscal compensation to municipalities with OLS.

	Dependent variable			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Government transfers (in millions of HUF)			
<i>Fidesz mayor</i>	17.17 (31.83)	3.66 (31.01)	-48.49 (27.54)	-47.25 (27.49)
<i>Opposition mayor</i>	-2,252.27*** (101.06)	-1,177.66*** (127.65)	-1,315.91*** (115.93)	-1,311.94*** (115.74)
<i>New mayor</i>	-69.21** (25.78)	-20.66 (25.37)	-19.77 (22.41)	-18.88 (22.38)
<i>Population</i>	0.07*** (0.001)	0.08*** (0.001)	0.08*** (0.003)	0.08*** (0.003)
<i>Tax revenue</i>			0.08** (0.02)	
<i>Business tax revenue</i>				0.12*** (0.03)
<i>Opposition × new mayor</i>				-1,532.77*** (170.55)
Constant	-45.64** (16.73)	-2,298.27*** (173.89)	-1,553.30*** (170.70)	-81.59*** (14.55)
Observations	3,181	3,181	3,158	3,158
R ²	0.51	0.54	0.62	0.62
Adjusted R ²	0.51	0.54	0.62	0.62
Residual Std. error	681.05 (df = 3176)	663.16 (df = 3175)	584.78 (df = 3151)	583.87 (df = 3151)
F Statistic	835.54*** (df = 4; 3176)	739.93*** (df = 5; 3175)	844.61*** (df = 6; 3151)	848.93*** (df = 6; 3151)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

the relationship is not significant, suggesting that the government explicitly punished opposition localities, as independent mayors pose no threat for autocratic sustainability.¹⁰

To examine the possibility that the ruling party perceives new challengers to be more potent and dangerous than incumbent mayors governing opposition strongholds, we now turn to interpreting our interaction term capturing a mayor being newly elected *and* nominated by the opposition. The variable operationalising this condition is negatively correlated with provision of government funds and has the largest effect size in our model. Estimates are remarkably consistent across models, indicating that ousting a Fidesz mayor cost, on average, 1.5 billion HUF (€4.1M) for municipalities, when tax revenues and the mayor's partisanship are already accounted for. Marginal effects indicate (Figure 3) that incumbency in previous term is associated with significantly more government transfers only for mayors nominated by the opposition. Contrarily, being a new mayor versus an incumbent for independent or Fidesz mayors does not alter significantly the predicted amount of central funds a municipality can obtain.

We also find a positive correlation between (business) tax revenues and government transfers, which makes sense: these funds were meant to compensate municipalities for being divested of their revenues during COVID-19. This, however, is overshadowed by the effect sizes of political variables. Take the example of Miskolc, Hungary's fourth largest city. Model (4) predicts that it would receive up to €3.9M, given its tax revenues in the previous budget year, while simultaneously losing more for ending Fidesz's local rule via electing an eight-party opposition challenger as the new mayor.

Conclusions

This article set out to capture how austerity measures might be used by incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes against opposition actors, via selectively targeting local governments under opposition control. Our empirical analysis focused on Hungary, a country that witnessed an unprecedented democratic backsliding within the European Union, yet its most recent municipal elections in 2019 resulted in the first-ever electoral breakthrough of a united opposition coalition. Fearing that newly elected



Figure 3. Marginal effect of incumbency on mayors' partisanship. Municipalities ousting Fidesz mayors and electing opposition ones as their successors received far less transfers, indicating the government's intention to deprive potent challengers of resources. See the online version of this article for a colour version of this figure.

mayors demonstrating competence during COVID-19 will undermine support for ruling populist-right Fidesz, the government took away a large chunk of subnational revenues, effectively ending fiscal autonomy of municipalities, with subsequent compensation offered as remedy only for a subset of municipalities with (mostly) Fidesz mayors. We argue it was made possible by a critical juncture, allowing Fidesz to mask the deletion of resources available for subnational actors as pandemic protection measures, whereas other, more repressive tools, such as dismissing or imprisoning mayors based on fabricated charges, remained unfeasible, given the constraints of the European Court of Justice, the European Court of Human Rights or the European Union (Bogaards, 2018).

An analysis of government fund allocation to municipalities has provided strong support for our *fiscal strangulation* hypothesis: whereas Fidesz-led municipalities, on average, did not receive more central funds, opposition mayors were associated with substantially less government transfers. This effect is multiplied if the mayor was not an incumbent before 2019, suggesting that Hungary's autocratic government wanted to fiscally neutralise institutions hatching potent challengers, after witnessing an increased likelihood of regime breakdown. We argued that the combination of COVID-19 and the opposition's electoral breakthrough was a critical juncture (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007); accordingly, we presented evidence for dramatic changes shaping mayors' and municipalities' position vis-à-vis an autocratic government. Only time will tell whether targeting opposition actors with resource deletion will launch a path-dependent trajectory where Hungary's electoral autocracy becomes even less competitive, or challengers will emerge from other arenas of political life, where resource accumulation is easier.

How to generalise the argument of this paper beyond the Hungarian case? Other hybrid regimes and electoral autocracies, such as Turkey and Russia, are obvious contenders for contexts where similar mechanisms might be found. Similarly to Hungary, opposition in Turkey has achieved a major breakthrough at the local elections in 2019. Several Justice and Development Party (AKP) strongholds, under the party's control for 25 years, as well as major economic powerhouses of the country, such as Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya or Adana elected opposition mayors, ousting Islamist-nationalist incumbents (Yavuzylmaz, 2021). Losing such metropolitan areas hurt AKP primarily because municipalities provide the parties with resources for patronage and serve as "major venue[s] for clientelistic distribution" (Esen and Gumuscu, 2019, 4). Unsurprisingly, Erdoğan rushed to prevent newly elected mayors from realising their policy agenda, to "block the democratising moment", whilst also prohibiting municipal-level fundraising initiatives to combat the pandemic (Somer et al., 2021, 15). Future studies can look into how authoritarian governments reacted to suffering serious losses at local elections in Turkey and elsewhere,

where mayors have a similar role in sustaining single-party dominance, being "central figures in the distribution of clientelism" (Mares and Young, 2018, 1464).

Our findings on COVID-19 accelerating centralisation and elimination of checks and balances in Hungary go in the same direction of recent literature on the expansion of executive power during the pandemic (Gidengil et al., 2022, 18). Cross-national comparisons also demonstrated that encroachment on individual liberties and democratic principles during COVID-19 were more common in countries with lower levels of baseline quality of democracy (Engler et al., 2021), a finding underpinned by our Hungarian case study. Ultimately, the evidence from this analysis also strengthens the arguments that the pandemic acted as a driver of authoritarian consolidation (Badran and Turnbull, 2022).

Our study documenting the fiscal strangulation of the Hungarian opposition also provides insights for understanding the systematic constraints imposed on subnational democracy by governments in hybrid regimes (Jakli and Stenberg, 2021). Often times, formal rules offer little guidance when analysing the dependency of municipalities; our case study suggests opposition actors' fiscal room for manoeuvre might be more important than the constitutional protection, that on paper, local governments still enjoy in Hungary. This should be a warning sign for European policy makers focusing exclusively on national-level institutions in their efforts to halt de-democratisation, while providing some leverage to stakeholders facilitating direct access to funds from EU stimulus packages for subnational actors (Volintiru, 2021).

Finally, our findings compliment contemporary research on the conditions under which hybrid regimes resort to co-optation or repression (Gandhi, 2008) by showing how strategically induced austerity, which we argue is a "non-repressive pillar of authoritarian governance" (Rogov, 2018, 152), might be another option for incumbents to deprive their opposition of resources and consequently delay potential democratisation. We demonstrated how this tool of authoritarian sustainability was targeted at the subnational level, but potentially any other institution can fall victim of such practices, as long as it provides shelter and potential for growth to opposition actors. Future research would benefit from identifying institutional constraints and socio-political conditions which shape autocratic leaders' decision whether to engage in resource deletion (that is leaving elected opposition politicians in office, expecting that the lack of resources will undermine challengers' performance) or to reclaim material and political resources which have slipped out of their hands (via forcefully removing opposition actors and appointing government loyalists instead). These conclusions also suggest that future research on the interplay of austerity and democratisation might do better to pay less attention to economic crises accelerating regime breakdowns, and more to conceptualise austerity as part of (semi-)authoritarian regimes' toolbox.

Endnotes

- 1 Fidesz formally governs in a coalition with KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party); but as most KDNP members are also members of Fidesz, and KDNP has not contested any election alone since 1998, it is generally classified as a satellite party (Enyedi, 2016; Kovarek and Soós, 2016). Accordingly, we omit any further mention of the party.
- 2 Only Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Peru had worse deaths per 100,000 inhabitants rate than Hungary. Globally, 81.6 COVID-related deaths were registered per 100,000 inhabitants, while this number is 478.0 for Hungary (World Health Organization, 2022).
- 3 Fidesz-allied skinheads physically prevented a Socialist MP to submit his referendum proposal in the National Election Office building. A spyware named "Pegasus" was used against domestic targets, including journalists, protesters and opposition politicians.
- 4 According to the Local Autonomy Index (LAI), which captures both the formal and effective autonomy of local governments, Hungarian local autonomy dropped relatively quickly as a consequence of Orbán's reforms, showing the largest decline among the 39 countries covered by the LAI (Ladner et al., 2019). See Appendix D in the Supplementary Material.
- 5 Uniquely among all Hungarian parties, Fidesz refused to produce an electoral manifesto since 2010.
- 6 The Mayor of Kaposvár invited his colleagues to a meeting, with a single item on its agenda: George Soros and his "immigration-organising" foundations. The council of Nagykáta banned "LGBTQ propaganda" in institutions run by the municipality.
- 7 Gergely Karácsony, who was elected as Mayor of Budapest in 2019, was widely regarded as the frontrunner of the 2021 opposition primaries, before a surprise finish as third. The primaries were won by another mayor, Péter Márki-Zay, who gained reputation by fulfilling most of his pledges shortly after he was elected to lead Hódmezővásárhely.
- 8 For instance, the Mayor of Szekszárd, a Fidesz politician, fired CEOs of municipality-owned companies, disbanded the editorial staff of the municipal newspaper and passed a new budget, taking advantage of not needing to seek approval from the opposition-controlled council.
- 9 In the USA, the Coronavirus Relief Fund was proportional to the population only in approx. half of all states, as 21 states received the same amount (Green and Loualiche, 2021). In Colombia, fund allocation increased tensions in intergovernmental relations, as the pandemic response was characterised by a clash of competencies and "a sort of race" between the president's cabinet and mayors/governors (Ramírez de la Cruz et al., 2020, 689–690).
- 10 In the Appendix, we show that these results are robust to a variety of other operationalisations (Tables A1–A6). We also provide further details about data collection and present descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analysis (Table A7).

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* online.

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